

FORMER WARDS OF THE STATE: CHARACTERISTICS OF ENROLLMENT AND  
PERSISTENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

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Foster care alumni are a unique subset of college students who enter post-secondary education having faced significant socio-economic challenges and emotional trauma. These students often understand how attending post-secondary education can help create a more stable life. However, the graduation of this population is extremely low. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand formerly fostered youths' perspectives of the needs and stressors students face while attending post-secondary education. Specifically, the researcher wanted to understand what characteristics influence former foster care youth to enroll in college and what characteristics help former foster care youth persist in higher education until graduation. The study utilized both student departure theory and resilience theory to frame each research question conceptually. The results illuminated the resilience of former fostered youth attending post-secondary education and their characteristics for continued enrollment.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Mankind owes to the child the best that it has to give...*

1924 Declaration on the Rights of the Child

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019), there are approximately 425,000 youth between the ages of 0 and 18 in the foster care system at any given moment. There are 200,000 persons between the ages of 18 and 25 who have exited care; in addition, 25,000 youth age out of the foster care system annually, adding to this number (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Youth between the ages of 16 and 21 live in various states of transition. Berzin et al. (2011) reported that 65% of youth leaving foster care are immediately in need of housing. They also noted that former fostered youth (FY) are 50% more likely to be in the criminal justice system, with 25% of those youth ending in jail just two years after emancipation. Formerly FY also comprise 80% of all death row inmates in the United States at any given time.

Table 1

*Outcomes of Foster Care (FY)*

Outcome	%
Female Exited FC Youth Pregnant by Age 21	70%
Exited FC Youth in Prison	74%
Exited FC Youth in jail two years post-exit	50%
Exited FC Youth on Death Row	80%
Homeless immediately upon exit	20%
Exited FC Youth living in poverty	33.2%
Exited FC Youth diagnosed with PTSD	25%

*Source:* Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Cutuli et al., 2016; Davis, 2006; Jones, 2011; Juvenile Law Center, 2018; McDonald, 1996; Paulhus, 2019; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003; Wolanin, 2005; Yang et al., 2017; Zlotnick et al., 2012.

Many FY have mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (twice our military veterans' rate). They are four times more likely than the non-fostered populations to attempt suicide and three times more likely to have a drug or alcohol addiction. Only half of the 200,000 individuals who have aged out will have gainful employment by the time they reach age twenty-four (Kids Count Data Center, 2019; Paulhus, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2018), the nation's largest operating foundation on foster care issues, 35% of youth leave the system with no high school diploma or equivalent. (See Table 1)

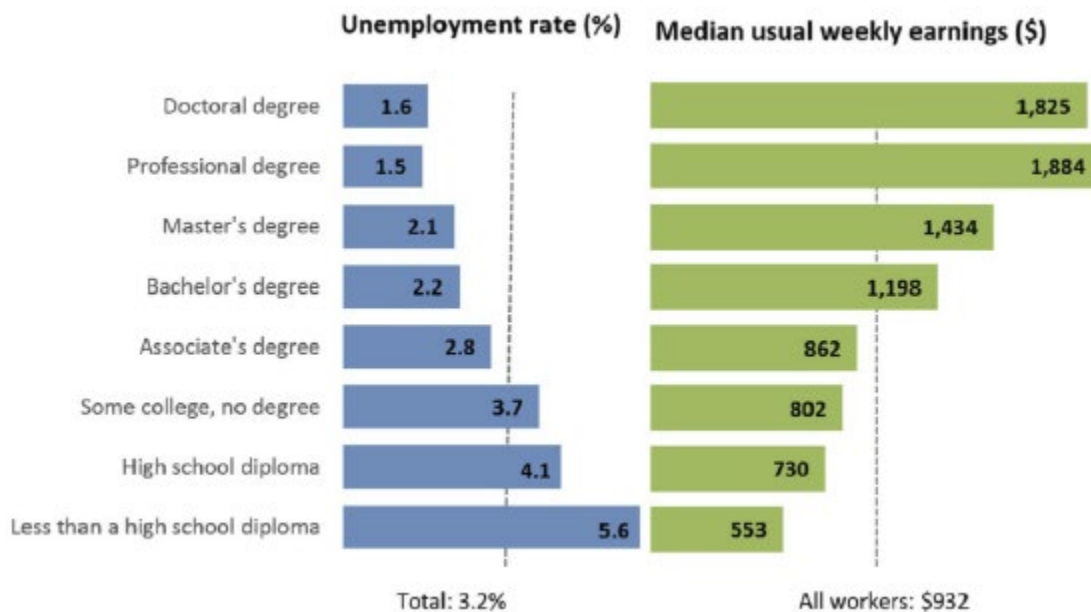
In contrast to these statistics, those who earn a bachelor's degree or another advanced degree are propelled to a middle-class lifestyle. Post-secondary education is essential to the middle class because of its benefits associated with a higher income levels and better job security (Barnow et al., 2015; Davis, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Those with more education are paid more for their work and are less likely to be laid off from their jobs. If employees do separate from their jobs, usually there is a shorter period until employed again (US Department of Labor and Statistics, 2019). Author (2014) reported that those who earn a bachelor's degree gain, on average, 80% more salary than a high school graduate over a 40-year career. This percentage estimates that a worker will earn about \$500,000 more during their lifetime by obtaining a bachelor's degree. He also reported that those earning a degree are more likely to be employed at a higher rate than those who did not complete a college degree. Graduates with an associate's degree showed a 2.8% rate of unemployment.

According to the US Department of Labor and Statistics (2019), as recently as December 2018, the unemployment rate for those with bachelor's degrees was 2.2%. Those who have not earned a bachelor's degree on average had an unemployment rate of 4.05%. (See Figure 1)

Simpson (2017) believed that high unemployment levels impose substantial costs on individuals, society, and the country.

Figure 1

*Unemployment Rates and Earnings by Educational Attainment, 2018*



Source: U.S. Department of Labor and Statistics, 2019. Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.

College and university graduates tend to have better overall health, rely less on government-funded social programs, are less likely to be personally involved with the criminal justice system, and are more likely to engage in civic activities (Baum & Payea, 2005). When looking at almost every measure of economic well-being and career attainment—from personal earnings to job satisfaction—young college graduates outperform their peers with less education (Pew Research Center, 2020).

To help combat the disparity between FY and non-FY in higher education, the Federal government allows youth to qualify for and receive educational grants to help defray education costs. These grants enable students to attend the college of their choice and receive monies to

help pay for school (US Department of Education, 2019). Individual states also contribute to students attending college by providing financial support through vouchers. These vouchers cover the cost of tuition and fees at state institutions of higher education. The students, however, are not using these vouchers in any substantial way. Often, the money set aside for former wards of the state goes unutilized (Collie et al., 2016). In addition to this, FY are placed with families or in group homes where the caretaker does not have the cultural capital to navigate the system of higher education (Sullivan, 2001).

### Statement of Purpose

The number of foster care alumni is increasing annually. These youth often experience social ills, perpetuating social service dependence and creating yet another generation of youth in and through the foster care system. Statistics show that people benefit from higher education through improved social benefits. Through their college attendance at more significant rates, these youth could mitigate systemic barriers and become productive members of society. The problem lies in the fact that we do not know how and why foster care alumni enroll or do not enroll in higher education. We do not know the formal or informal structures that youth utilize to persist until graduation.

### Research Questions

RQ1. What characteristics influence former foster care youth to enroll in college?

RQ2. What characteristics help former foster care youth persist in higher education until graduation?

### Significance of the Study

During FY 2014 alone, more than 23,800 children exited from foster care nationally (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). What if researchers looked at those students who

completed high school to find out how they were successful and then generalized those results so that more students would complete their degrees? What if the data increases the number of former FY who graduate from college but then use that data to help other non-traditional students earn their degrees?

There are currently very few studies that look at our former foster youth's success stories who have graduated from college. The literature does not look at resources or personal characteristics that help students commit to and finish their undergraduate education. The vast majority of the literature only speaks to those students who have left the academy before receiving their intended baccalaureate degree. However, suppose the academy wishes to increase the graduation rates among this first-time, first-year population. In that case, it is helpful to know what is going well and what hinders students from accomplishing their intended goals.

#### Delimitations

This research is limited to those students who have designated themselves as former wards of the state. While students who have aged out of the foster care system do not need to declare to the university that they were previously in foster care, by indicating their participation in the foster care system, I have more assurance that the student was a former foster care youth.

This research is also limited to one public institution of higher education because foster care alumni have locally constructed realities and the lived experiences that might influence the study. Therefore, results will not be generalizable to other institutions or other geographical locations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### Limitations

This research has at least one built-in limitation. Foster care youth in the system have a distrust of adults. These youth, who have been violated in their homes and by the foster care

system, do not usually trust people straight away, especially those who might influence the bureaucracy of post-secondary education. This distrust could have an impact on student responses to questions.

### Definition of Terms

- *College qualified*: A person who has received either a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED) can meet basic admissions standards for either a community college or a four-year institution (Wolanin, 2005).
- *Foster care*: 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pre-adoptive homes. A child is in foster care following this definition regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed.
- *Foster care alumni*: Those children at the age of majority (either 18 or 21 depending on the state) are considered adults and no longer under State care supervision. They are also called ‘aged-out’ or ‘emancipated’ (Herman, 2012).
- *Persist*: to resolutely or stubbornly despite opposition, opportunity, or warning; or continue to exist, especially past a usual, expected, or standard time. To continue to do something or to try to do something even though it is difficult or other people want you to stop (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, 2015).
- *Resilience*: The concept of resilience describes three different types of experiences (a) individuals who have endured traumatic events but can recover well; (b) individuals belonging to high-risk groups and have more favorable outcomes than is expected for the situation; and (c) individuals who show positive adaptation despite life stressors (Richardson, 2002).

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*There is probably no group of young people in America more at risk than those who have “aged out” of foster care.*

Jimmy Carter

#### History of Foster Care in the United States

The foster care system’s formal definition is challenging, as there are several standards researchers and politicians use. Some researchers define foster care as “those persons removed from the home, or those persons who have had parental rights terminated” (Herman, 2012 para. 3). Others describe foster care as a temporary removal from the home (Geck, 2006). Often, however, the most widely used definition for foster care is the “care given outside a child’s natural home for more than 24 hours when the child’s home is not available to him or her excluding children at camps, in hospitals, or on weekend visits” (Davis, 2006, p. 15). Historically speaking, the foster care system is referred to “as boarding out, implying that foster parents were almost always non-relatives” (Shally-Jensen, 2010, p. 971). Monetary compensation for these non-relatives offset the expense of caring for the dependent children that temporarily live with them. The basic principle behind the concept of foster care is the ultimate protection of the child in their care as well as “permanency and the preservation of families” (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008, p. 235).

The Old Testament and the Talmud house are the oldest documents for taking care of children cared for in a foster setting (Clements, 2020). These dependent children, seen as a duty of care under the law, and early Christian church records show that children were often boarded with women considered “worthy widows” and were paid a stipend from the congregation’s tithes and offerings. However, the British Poor Laws led to the development and eventual regulation of

family foster care in the United States. By 1562, the English Poor Laws allowed poor youth to be placed into indentured servitude until they came of age (Clements, 2020). This practice of placing youth into indentured servitude migrated to the United States. It became the impetus of putting children into non-familial homes. Although the practice of indentured servitude permitted abuse and exploitation, it did allow the youth to learn a trade. Previously, youth lived in almshouses, which also housed practicing alcoholics, persons with severe mental health issues, or a person with a physical disability (Shally-Jensen, 2010). The youth at these housing facilities were faced with abuse and were often repeatedly victimized; they were not safe places for the youth to be. As a result, most youths left these group homes and became gangs of kids roaming the streets and taking care of themselves (Shally-Jensen, 2010).

Parents also abandoned their children due to overcrowding in the home, an inability to afford the child's cost of living in the home, lack of birth control options, or even parental death (Bartholet, 1999). "In 1636, less than thirty years after the founding of the Jamestown Colony, at the age of seven, Benjamin Eaton became this nation's first foster child" (Clements, 2020, para. 3).

The system of caring for unaccompanied youth was not working for the youth or society at large. As such, social welfare systems attempted to develop a new way of caring for youth. In 1853, Charles Loring Brace, the father of modern social work, began the work of providing free foster homes for youth. Originally trained as a minister, Brace and the New York Children's Aid Society director, concerned themselves with the large numbers of immigrant children sleeping on New York streets. As such, they created a plan to provide homes for unaccompanied youth by advertising to families in the South and West willing to provide homes for the children (McDonald, 1996; Shapley, 2010).



These children, in many cases, are placed into circumstances similar to those of indentured servitude. Brace believed that rural areas, mainly farming communities, needed children as an additional labor force (Clements, 2020). It could provide the youth with housing and develop a skill that would make them productive members of society in life. These adoption trains in the South and West impacted the lives of around 100,000 children over a 75-year history (McDonald, 1996).

Concerned with youth separated from their spiritual traditions, the Boston Children's Aid Society decided to take Brace's concept of placing children with non-familial custodians but added a new element of developing a structured process for considering the children's needs before placement (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008). The Boston Children's Aid Society looked at (a) the individual needs of the child, (b) the prospective foster family, and (c) provided supervision of the home once the child became placed (Kadushin, 1974). The Boston Children's Aid Society believed placing children in foster homes needed to be informed by both the child's needs and possible reunification with biological parents or families could establish permanent housing. This process is still used today in placing foster care children in temporary custody.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought changes to the foster care system. Like Henry Dwight Chapin and his wife, Alice, social reformers established the first specialized adoption agency in 1910 (Herman, 2012). By 1950, children in the foster care system outnumbered children living in an institutional housing unit (Clements, 2020). This trend continued. By 1960, there were two times as many children in the foster care system than those in institutional housing units. Not until the late 1970s to early 1980s did the foster care population reach over 500,000 children in its care. This statistic has remained constant even until the 2010s (Herman, 2012). The foster care system's modern aims are to reunify "children with their biological parents, adopt by foster

parents or other families, or prepare for independent living” (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008, p. 235).

The four types of foster care in the United States are family (non-relative) foster care, kinship (relative) care, therapeutic foster care, and residential group care (Shally-Jensen, 2010). Youth entering the foster care system generally enter the lowest care level and exit at the highest form of care (*M.D. v Abbott* 2015).

### Fostered Youth (FY)

There has been an improvement for those aging out of the system; however, foster care youth still end up broken and, socially speaking, function poorly as adults. The research shows that merely being a foster care youth automatically decreases functioning as an adult.

Steadily increasing, the numbers of youth entering the foster care system have risen 10.1% since 2012. Today, between 75-80% of children in foster care enter the system due to the parent’s inability to care for their children adequately. Parents faced with sudden calamity, parental physical or mental illness, imprisonment, or those suffering from drug/alcohol addiction are more likely to have their children removed from their home and placed in foster care. Alternatively, they may abuse, neglect, or abandon their children. Between 15-20% of foster children enter the system because parents have problems. Less than 5% enter foster care due to the parent’s inability to afford the child’s cost, chronic unemployment, or inadequate housing to which the parent surrenders custody (McDonald et al., 1997).

There are nearly 450,000 children and youth in foster care within the United States (Greer, 2012; McDonald et al., 1997; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). More than 30,000 people aged out of foster care have no knowledge or support in transitioning into adulthood (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Havlicek, 2011; McCutcheon, 2010; Unrau, 2011). There are approximately 29,000 children in state custody in the region of study at any

given moment (McCutcheon, 2010; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

Youth were removed from family homes due to neglect at a rate of 61%, which constitutes approximately 166,680 youth nationwide. Parental drug abuse was the most prevalent reason why youth came into the foster care system, making up 34% (92,100) FY in care. Others who joined the foster care system came because of the caretakers' inability to cope (14%; 37,860), child physical abuse (12%; 33,670), and children with behavioral problems (11%; 28,830). At a lower but still significant rate, parental incarceration constituted 8% (20,940) of youth entering the foster care system, followed by parental substance abuse at 6% (15,140), child abandonment at 5% (12,890), and youth disability at 2% (4,550) (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

Of the 250,248 youth who exited care nationally, 8% (20,532) youth left the foster care system because of emancipation (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Conditions within the foster care system are so dysfunctional that in 2011, children in long-term foster care (permanent managing conservatorship) sued the State of Texas alleging the state had violated FYs' Fourteenth Amendment rights by exposing FY to an "unreasonable risk of harm while in the state's care" (Murphy, 2019 p. 2). The plaintiffs claim that

Texas violated their Fourteenth Amendment substantive due process rights, including "the right to be reasonably safe from harm while in government custody and the right to receive the most appropriate care, treatment, and services" by how the State and its officials manage the Department of Family and Protective Services and the departments under its control. (*M.D. v Abbott* 2015 p. 25)

In this context, harm is defined as harm sustained by physical or psychological abuse. The US District Court judge ruled the state was liable for violating thousands of Texas children's rights in 2015. By 2018, the District Court had "ordered a permanent injunction against the state with detailed steps Texas must take to remedy the constitutional violations" (Murphy, 2019, p. 2).

The state appealed the court's decision. In October 2018, a panel of judges on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the verdict that Texas had in fact violated children's constitutional rights within Texas's foster care system. The Fifth Circuit Court found:

1. Texas' repeated failure to reduce caseloads and address caseworker turnover meant that children waited unreasonably long periods to see their caseworkers or children lacked a stable relationship with a consistent caseworker.
2. Poor record-keeping exacerbated the situation as new caseworkers had difficulty accessing complete information about their cases.
3. Unchecked systemic deficiencies in the monitoring and oversight of licensed caregivers or foster care facilities put too many children at an unreasonable risk of harm. (Murphy, 2019, p. 2)

The testimony came from youth in care, caseworkers, foster parents, and other professionals tasked with the management and protection of FY.

Their experiences (within the foster care system), however, paint a similar picture: children often enter foster care at a basic level of service, are assigned a carousel of overburdened caseworkers, suffer abuse and neglect that is rarely confirmed or treated, are shuttled between placements often inappropriate for their needs- throughout the state, are migrated through schools at a rate that makes academic achievement impossible, are medicated with psychotropic drugs, and unable to succeed as adults. (*M.D. v Abbott*, 2015, p. 56)

Several named litigants spoke of having over 45 placements while in care and the system with a third or fourth-grade reading level. The litigants spoke of having multiple caseworkers and attending several schools in several school districts. At the same time, their physical and sexual abuse claims were ignored. These litigants spoke of the mismanagement of all of their essential records and documents. Educational records were so mismanaged that students were subjected to repeated grades or skipped grades altogether, without explaining why or any record continuity. District-mandated shot records required for education were not kept with student's permanent files and thus lost. These lost shot records led to students receiving their immunizations multiple times. These court documents stated that the treatment these youths endured was "typical of the entire foster care system in the State of Texas" (*M.D. v Abbott* 2015, p. 73). Moreover, Texas

youth sued for better treatment; these experiences documented in the lawsuit are not unlike the experiences youth face across the country.

Foster care alumni have much in common with the typical characteristics of non-traditional students. Non-traditional students typically delay enrollment, attending schooling at least part-time for at least part of the academic year. They tend to work full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled in school and are considered financially independent. Often, they have dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others). They are older than their traditional counterparts and must direct their energy to many different outlets instead of focusing entirely on school (Planty et al., 2009.)

FY were subjected to several traumatic events, from neglect and abuse, removal from their family and friends, or the death of a parent before they reached the age of majority. These individual traumatic events, coupled with numerous foster placements and high instability within family units, cause students to suffer from various developmental/cognitive and social/emotional issues. Unfortunately, subsequent traumatic experiences follow students through their multiple placements, housing changes, foster homes, group homes, and school changes, ultimately lead to their mental health instability.

Even though these students have experienced various amounts of trauma and instability, they have also realized pursuing a college degree may afford them some of the stability they have desperately sought their entire lives. Of the research indicating college aspirations of former foster care alumni, 70% of those surveyed expressed a desire to go to college (Lovitt and Emmerson, 2009). However, it is estimated that only a fraction of these students enrolled in college and even fewer graduated.

Foster care alumni are not tracked after enrolling in post-secondary education. Most of

the research dealing with this population looks at the deficits students have in pursuing a college degree and does not look at students' character strengths while pursuing a bachelor's degree. Courtney et al.'s (2011) report on children who have aged out of the foster care system used a quantitative longitudinal study that looked at various factors of the students' lives in this study; education was a variable in their research. They documented the main reasons why a student left an institution of higher education and determined the most numerous responses were students "needed to work" ( $r = 129, n = 211$ ), "could not afford tuition and fees" ( $r = 93, n = 211$ ), and "childcare responsibilities" ( $r = 79, n = 211$ ) (Courtney, p. 25).

### Modern Foster Care Studies

Several studies have evaluated the condition of former FY after emancipation. These studies (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Gypen et al., 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011) generally looked at the overall well-being of former FY. However, these studies often are challenging to complete as the newly emancipated youth are not always easy to locate for continued longitudinal studies. Even with these limitations, studies evaluating the employment/income levels of formerly FY along with housing, involvement with the criminal justice system, health/mental health issues, and educational attainment become invaluable resources to evaluate the current foster care system. These evaluations then can give clues as to how post-secondary institutions can best support students who happen to make it to college.

### Employment/Income

Several studies suggest former FY are more likely to obtain lower educational levels than their non-fostered counterparts (Fellmeth, 2011; Geiger & Beltran, 2017). These lower educational levels, in turn, reflect the lower levels of employment and income acquired by youths who age out of the foster care system (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Hook & Courtney,

2011; Geiger & Beltran 2017). In the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, (Pecora et al., 2006) found “the employment rate among alumni who were eligible for work was 80.1%, which was substantially lower than the national rate of 95% for ages 20 – 34 during [the year] 2000” (p. 1471). Many of the respondents in this study also reported that they had trouble finding well-paying jobs. One-third of the alumni in this study “lived at or below the federal poverty line; this is three times the national poverty rates” (Pecora et al., 2006, p. 1472). Less than half of foster care alumni have full-time employment – and earned less than half of their peers with no history of foster care by age 24 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

## Housing

Between 11 and 35% of former FY suffer from homelessness immediately the following emancipation from care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gypen et al., 2017). Dworsky reported nearly 14% of their participants indicated they had been homeless at some point in their lives after exiting care; 54% of those who said they experienced homelessness did so multiple times. Twenty-one percent claimed to experience homelessness for over one month (Dworsky). Fowler et al. (2017) designed the first study to use national data and similar comparisons to look at housing outcomes for FY aged out of the system. Their study found that nearly 25% of youth experienced not just one but a myriad of risks for inadequate housing in the transition to adulthood. Of this 25% swath of youth, approximately one quarter moved over three times in one calendar year. The bottom line is by age 24 over 37% of foster care alumni experienced at least one incident of homelessness or had couch-surfed (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

## Criminal Involvement

Cutuli et al. (2016) reported a lack of comprehensive, longitudinal, cross-sector data to help understand long-term outcomes for children in foster care related to the criminal justice

system. However, in 40 years of small research studies, the evidence was clear; children involved with social services and foster care are at higher risk for delinquency and the criminal justice system. They also reported the link between multiple placements in the foster care system correlated with more significant criminal justice agencies' involvement.

Circumstances leading to the youth involvement in foster care system often increase youths' risk for anti-social or deviant behavior. For example, those youth who experience physical abuse and neglect are often at higher risk for becoming involved with the criminal justice system (Cutuli et al., 2016). Yang et al., (2017) noted that there is little empirical research considering the role of foster care and offending tendencies. As a result, Yang et al. sought to interpret foster care length in stay and type of crime committed. They used data to examine whether youth in foster care were disproportionately more or less likely than non-FY to (a) demonstrate a pattern of offending or (b) participate in more severe criminal activity.

#### Health/Mental Health

Rates of pregnancies were higher for women who aged out of the foster care system than the general population (Jones, 2011). These pregnancies often occurred near the time of emancipation from care. Reilly's (2003) research sample of pregnancy in foster care attributed to 70%, far higher than the public pregnancy rate of 8.5%. FY sustained a higher prevalence of severe mental health issues than the general population (Wolanin, 2005). Zlotnich et al. (2012) used the 2003-2005 California Health Interview Survey data to compare the rates of mental and physical health of those youth who have aged out of the foster care system. They found that youth subjected to the foster care system as a child had "more than twice the odds of receiving Social Security Disability Insurance because they were unable to work owing to mental or physical health programs...even after stratifying by age and adjusting for demographic and



socioeconomic characteristics” (p. 534). Finally, the Salazar (2013) study of Casey Family Program scholarship recipients showed their participants struggled with mental health needs and job security.

Wolanin (2005) reported that more than half of the emancipated FY (54%) are diagnosed with mental health issues. This percentage is more than twice the general population rate of mental health disorders. In frequency, FY experienced more post-traumatic stress disorder, followed by “major depression, social phobia, panic syndrome, and generalized anxiety disorder” (p. vi). Twenty percent of these youth suffered from three or more conditions simultaneously. Foster youth also experience more severe mental-health disorders as compared to the general population. Even worse, these youth recover less frequently, and when they recover, they do so at a much slower rate. Unfortunately, many “foster youth with mental disorders do not receive adequate treatment either as youth or adults, in part because they do not have the life skills to seek and benefit from treatment” (Wolanin, 2005, p. iv). Many youth experience chronic health problems due to the abuse received while growing up. As a result of this upbringing, it is estimated that 85% of foster youth experience mental health issues (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

## Education

Educational delays of FY are well established in the literature. Studies as old as those conducted by Bachman et al. (1978) reported that 25% of FY were held back at least one grade level before reaching high school. In general, youth involved in the foster care system score markedly below their non-foster peers on standardized tests. Researchers report a deficit between 15 and 20 percentile points (Emerson & Lovitt &, 2003). Additionally, these researchers found that 30% to 96% performed below grade level in math and reading. Dworsky and

Courtney (2009) reported one-third of young people associated with the foster care system had neither received their high school diploma nor their GED. Barrat and Berlinger (2013) used a comprehensive dataset of all FY in California to determine their educational needs. Their findings, although state-specific, are generalizable to the entire country. They found that FY were distinctly different from other low-income students. FY were more likely to attend multiple schools within one academic year, more likely to be enrolled in the worst-performing schools, had the lowest participation in the state's testing programs, and had the lowest achievement rates of other at-risk groups (Greer, 2012). High school students had the highest dropout rates.

FY are also over-represented in special education in their primary and secondary school education. Involvement in specialized education courses does not prepare students for the rigors of postsecondary education. Approximately one-third of all foster care youth in primary and secondary education classified as needing special education services, three times as many as non-FY (Kirk et al., 2013; Wiegmann et al., 2014; Wolanin, 2005).

While these findings are alarming, they are also typical of the educational system in foster care. One plaintiff in the Texas court case reported that her "education was also significantly impacted by her many placement changes; she attended 16 different schools over 13 years" (*M.D. v Abbott* 2015, p. 89). This particular plaintiff is "well below normal in all areas" of education and by age 17 could not "read past the third or fourth-grade level" (*MD v Abbott* 2015, p. 89).

National data on FY and education outcomes indicate that 17-18-year-olds are three times more likely to be expelled from school, have an average reading level of a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, and 34.2% have experienced more than five school changes throughout their education (Kinarsky, 2017). Numerous housing changes cause significant disruptions in learning, taking weeks, even months,

to recover. Students changing schools and homes as frequently as these children are bound to have more psychological and trust issues, which develop and further disrupt student learning. The more placements a student has, the less likely they are to graduate from high school (Curry & Abrams 2015A; Havlicek, 2011; Salazar, 2012; Schwandt, 2013). The two most extensive studies of FY and education reported 65% of the youth do not obtain a high school diploma or equivalent until age 21. However, 86% among all youth ages 18-26 obtained a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

### Challenges in Going to College

Research has indicated over the past 20 years that youth in the foster care system fall academically behind their peers almost immediately post removal from their homes. FY seldom achieve beneficial credentials while attending school and are far less likely than their peers to obtain post-secondary education (Kinarsky, 2017; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Wolanin, 2005). This lack of education is believed, in part, because foster care youth can have multiple placements while attending school, leaving significant gaps in student instruction. Emerson et al. (2003), Morton (2018), and Wolanin (2005) indicated each move a FY makes while in care equates to a 4-to 6-month loss of academic instruction. Pecora et al.'s (2006) Northwest Study on FC alumni indicated “nearly one-third of the alumni reported ten or more school changes from elementary school through high school, and alumni had an average of 6.5 housing placements” while they were in the care of the state (p. 1462).

McMillin et al. (2003) documented the school experiences of 262 youth who were living in the foster care system in the Midwestern United States. They discovered that of that number, 73% of the youth had received the punishment of suspension at least once since the seventh grade, 16% were expelled, 58% had failed a class, and 29% had physical fights with students.

These behavioral and educational interruptions in learning do not lend to high achieving student status. Multiple placements and frequent disruptions to learning often can exacerbate any psychological issues the youth might be experiencing. FY are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) 25% of the time, two times higher in former FY than for military combat personnel (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Wolanin, 2005). These youth additionally are diagnosed with major depressive disorder (20%), social phobia (17%), generalized panic disorder (15%), and anxiety disorder (12%) out of the total population (Morton, 2015; Wolanin, 2005).

Blome (1997) utilized the national longitudinal study High School and Beyond Survey to analyze foster care youth's educational experiences compared to those with no foster care experience. Blome's study reported 59% of the foster children were functioning below grade level, of which 11% were three to five years behind grade level. Blome also reported that two-thirds of the youth repeated one or more grades in their educational journey. At the same time, only 39% completed the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In her original research, Blome found that foster youth earned mostly Cs and spent significantly less time studying for their classes than non-FY who studied more and earned mostly Bs and Cs. Additionally, foster care youth were also significantly less likely to follow college-preparatory education tracks than their non-FY counterparts. Mental health disorders coupled with instability in housing and educational fluidity scratches the surface as to why more students do not persist in attending college even if they have the desire. FY can also exhibit a condition called *learned helplessness*, which occurs when a "child learn[s] that [their] circumstance [is] unlikely to change and it manifests itself in the form of a helpless sense, or learned helplessness" (*M.D. v Abbott* 2015, p. 183).

The foster parents in these foster homes often reported that they are "babysitters or short-

time caregivers” (Wolanin, 2005, p. 13). Youth living in group homes (which house up to 13 foster youth at one time) had even less control over their own lives. They needed court approval to attend social outings like the prom or homecoming. Rarely do they have access to kitchens or laundry facilities, thus creating an even more dependent young person (Havlicek, 2011).

Fostered youth often have difficulty trusting others, forming relationships, and have enduring relational wounds (Curry & Abrams, 2015B; Geenen and Powers, 2007; Wolanin, 2005). They also do not wish to depend upon anyone who perpetuates the dominant cultural values of “rugged individualism and personal autonomy” (Zigler, 2000, p. 146).

Poverty, however, “is the biggest barrier to college attendance” (Zusman, 2005, pp. 129-130). Experts often point out that students exit in the foster care system without essential resources: cash, job, driver’s license, cosigners on housing applications, food, medical insurance, or reliable transportation (Havlicek, 2011; Kirk et al., 2013). These more immediate circumstances also discourage students who have the desire to attend college but not the resources. Another form of poverty is described as a lack of knowledge about the process of going to college. This lack of cultural capital also can exclude youth from attending higher education (Sullivan, 2001). Bourdieu (1986) contended that cultural representations and social relationships account for social position. Because society works in agreement with societal norms determined by human interactions, they influence the definitions of what capital is and is not accepted in general society. Acting according to a manner that is most accepted is encouraged and can often receive positive reactions which becomes a form of return. Cultural capital might entail knowing why obtaining appropriate high scores on the SATs and ACTs is essential. Post-secondary education’s cultural capital might look like knowing the process of obtaining the resources for paying for college application fees. Students miss the cultural capital

of understanding the various types of colleges, admissions standards or requirements, writing scholarship essays' cultural capital, filing taxes, and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Cultural capital might even be something as simple as knowing how to address an envelope correctly (Lane and Taber, 2012; Sullivan, 2001).

Fostered youth often are not familiar with higher education terminology, nor are the foster parents charged with these minors' care. Fostered youth believe college is out of the question for them because they cannot afford the cost of attendance. Davis (2006) reported that FY are unaware of the different forms of financial aid available to them. It is estimated that nearly 1.5 million undergraduates lose out on financial aid opportunities because they did not complete the FAFSA. Most of these non-applicants were from low-income backgrounds (King, 2006). Fostered youth are at more of a disadvantage with FAFSA completion because of a lack of cultural capital. Fostered youth have the opportunity to get tuition and fees paid for by the federal government but understanding the terminology the FAFSA uses is such that the FY do not know that the federal term for former FY is "wards of the state." They did not have family support to complete the various aid forms needed to declare independent status as high school students. However, they are responsible for gathering these numerous documents to "declare financial independence as a ward of the state" (Batsche et al., 2014, p. 181).

Identity theft is also a common problem in the foster care system. Many individuals (parents or grandparents from whom the youth has been removed, other family members, group home staff, and others) have access to social security numbers and other sensitive information. Many youths do not know their identity was stolen until they aged out of care and officially apply for a credit card, an apartment, or a car loan. This lower credit score could also preclude a youth from obtaining a college loan (Children's Advocacy Institute, 2011; Fellmeth, 2011).

The challenges in getting to college are relatively numerous. Having multiple placements sets a student back academically and creates an atmosphere of mistrust and instability. This results in seeing no end in sight to the abuses and sufferings they endure year after year. These youth can develop learned helplessness as coping strategies instead of self-advocacy and tenacity. Poor academics, poverty, lack of cultural capital, and lack of support are significant challenges our FY must overcome just getting in the door of higher education.

### Challenges in Staying in College

Despite these challenges and all the potential setbacks listed above, some former FY start a college degree, and most want to go to college. Lovitt and Emerson (2009) reported that 70% of FY convey a great desire to continue their schooling by attending postsecondary education. However, in another research report, as much as 79% of high school foster care participants express a desire to complete a college degree. One of the most significant studies on FY in college, the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning and the Casey Family, have charted the outcomes of FY in college.

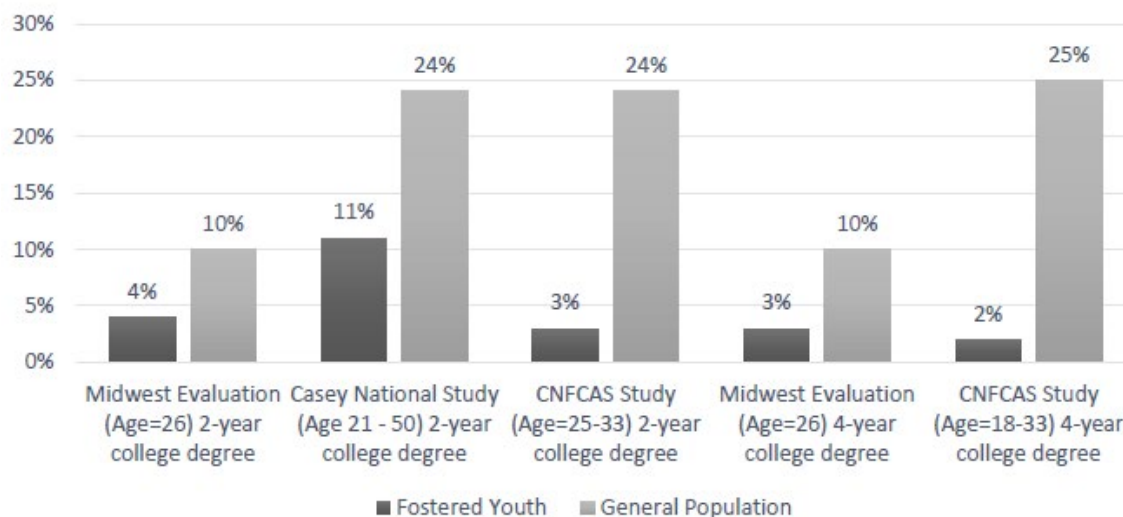
Courtney et al. (2011) reported that 26 participants out of 593 students (4.4%) earned a two-year degree, and only 15 students (2.5%) earned a degree from a four-year university. However, 188 (19.9%) FY had least one year of college either at a community or four-year institution but did not have a college degree. If it were possible to support these 188 students better, the graduation rate has the potential to rise to 31.7%. While this is a start, it is not enough because the goal is for the former FY to have graduated from a four-year institution.

In a survey of 38 high achieving young people who spent time in foster care, Martin and Jackson (2002) found that one-third of the research participants believed that negative stereotypes and low-performance expectations played a crucial role in the vast majority of their

lack of achievement. Over half of their sample also thought their foster placement did not have adequate tools to aid in their educational success. These tools could be as essential as a desk to sit at, books to read, pens/pencils, or even a quiet location to think. Their participants also believed they could not participate in extra-curricular activities. Teenagers develop the mental stamina and physical discipline extra-curricular activities provide. When their sample enrolled in higher education, they found that most participants dedicated a significant amount of time to gain year-round accommodations and food to sustain them when the campus closed. They also reported the desire of a “guardian angel” to continue to motivate them and support them on their journey through higher education. In this instance, the guardian angel is one person of whom the student could ask questions and have problems solved no matter the problem. These angels often give emotional support and encouragement to the former FY when times are challenging and celebrate with the youth when successes occur.

Figure 2

*College Degree Attainment: Fostered Youth vs. General Population*



Even with the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 that helps to support foster care children in postsecondary education financially, only 20% of college-qualified foster



youth attend college, and less than five percent complete a degree; these rates are far lower than the general population with 60% enrollment and 24% degree completion rates (Pecora et al., 2006; Wolanin, 2005) (see Figure 2).

Foster care alumni often do not know or understand the finances available to them. In Weston and Cheng's (2007) qualitative study of foster care, alumni reported, "it became glaringly obvious during the focus groups that students in foster care lack information about college that specifically addressed their circumstances and needs" (p. 17).

Courtney et al. (2011) noted that when paying for college, 59.4% was a significant factor in why they no longer continued in higher education. Male students reported the need to work full time to support themselves as an additional reason they could not continue with their post-secondary education (42.9% total; 37.6% male). Finally, females were more likely to report the need to take care of children as an additional reason why they could not continue in higher education (33.5% total; 47.1% females).

There are several factors researchers have listed as to why students do not persist in college until graduation with this specific population. Wolanin (2005) reported, "foster youth frequently have not developed the independent living skills needed to manage both life and studying on their own" (p. 25). Foster youth have a hard time balancing both life and school. Wolanin stated these students are "daunted by the relentless search for enough money to pay for the academic bills and to support themselves" (p. 44).

As one might imagine, with the plethora of academic challenges in high school with school changes and home placement changes, students attending college are having difficulty managing the academics associated with a higher education degree. According to Wolanin (2005):

Most foster youths do not seek assistance from campus student service counselors who are available. Foster youth often do not know what is available or resist getting help, wanting to put their experience in the “system” behind them and fearing that they may be stigmatized as foster youth. (p. 44).

Lovitt and Emmerson (2009) completed in-depth interviews of eight former FY alumni who had completed their college degrees to determine what factors led to their college success. The report noted that “study skills and time management have been identified as keys to academic success. Only two of the eight students appeared to have been provided with adequate instruction in these areas” (p. 2).

Fostered youth have a prevalence of mental health and other socio-economic hardships (unemployment, homelessness, criminal justice involvement, early parenthood, credit history ruined by family or foster) that make adulthood difficult (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Havlicek, 2011). They are not given their rights as a ward of the state to Social Security Income/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or other governmental assistance because the state used the money to pay for their care rather than help them save for life after foster care (Havlicek, 2011). They are often not given the developmental tools to grow into adulthood (seeing parents pay taxes, applying for jobs, paying bills). They are unaware of how these functions work (Havlicek, 2011).

### Policies for In-Care Support and College

It was not until 1986 that Congress allocated provisions for kids who age out of the foster care system. With the passing of the Independent Living Initiative (Public Law 99-272), dedicated funds were provided to the state-assisted older foster youth transitioning from foster care to independence (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008; Okpych, 2014). In 1990 and 1993, Congress increased the allocation of funds to a total of \$70 million, allowing states to develop and implement independent living centers designed to help youth ages 16-21 transition from social

care to self-sufficiency. The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 (Public Law 106-272) then replaced and expanded the Independent Living Initiative and doubled federal funding to FY to \$140 million per year. The Foster Care Independence Act allowed states the option of providing independent living services to FY under the age of 16. It also extended Medicaid eligibility to age 21. Two years later, the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program added to FCIA as part of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 (Public Law 107-133). In addition, \$60 million was allocated to support post-secondary education training initiatives. These “youth could now receive an ETV grant of up to \$5000 per year until age 23” (Okpych & Courtney, 2014, p.19.)

ETV funding applies to postsecondary education expenses, such as tuition, room and board, books, and transportation. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions (FCSIA) Act (Public Law 110-351) (Curry & Abrams, 2015A) was passed in 2008 and became fully active on October 1, 2010. FCSIA is a watershed law because it gives states the option to extend foster care to ages 19, 20, or 21. States that enact FCSIA legislation and receive federal approval are legally responsible for ensuring that the basic designated needs of youth who remain in care are met. Available services are reimbursed through Title IV-E funding. FCSIA is more comprehensive and substantial in coverage than FCIA. For example, while FCIA gives states the option to extend Medicaid beyond age 18 and the option to use up to 30% of FCIA monies on housing assistance, FCSIA mandates that Medicaid is available and provides housing until the youth leaves care. Finally, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315) in 2008 amended an earlier version of the law so that children in foster care (including those who were in-care beyond the age of 13) are eligible to participate in federal TRIO programs such as Educational Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Upward Bound Math and

Science. The act also permitted them to file as “independent” status on their FAFSA. Post-secondary institutions are required to have staff development activities in order to recruit and adequately serve former FY. They aim to create a climate support to students through specialized services and programming, like the federal TRIO programs: Student Support Services and Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program. These two programs were designed to help low-income, first-generation college students excel academically and graduate with their intended degrees. In the case of the McNair Achievement Program, the goal is to have undergraduates complete undergraduate research to have the skills to earn their doctorate (Curry & Abrams, 2015A).

In 1986, the independent living programs (ILP) initiative, a mandate that states developed, is a series of educational components to prepare youth for life after foster care (Curry & Abrams, 2015A). Originally, ILP programs were delivered before discharge from care and focused on solely on skill-building. Unfortunately, these programs did not provide support after the youth left to care. ILPs can include programs focused on job readiness, nutrition and housekeeping, and services such as transitional housing and assistance in high school completion or admission to post-secondary education. Unfortunately, little is known about the effectiveness of ILPs since the federal government did not collect data on the successes of the programs before 2011 (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009).

In 1999, the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program extended these educational programs to youth up to age 21 and extended Medicaid coverage. However, the funding was never sufficient to cover the need (Curry et al., 2014A; Davidson et al., 2009). These ILPs are not available to every youth. Because these programs are not available to everyone, only those who decided they wanted to stay within the system furthered their

relationship with the Department of Family Services. The Federal Fostering Connections Act (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act) allows young adults who age out of foster care to receive extended foster care. Extended foster care allows their continued support while attending post-secondary education or equivalent place of education. Conditions of this extended care include

1. 18 up to 22-year-olds, and:

- Regularly attending high school or enrolled in a program leading toward a high school diploma or school equivalency certificate (GED), or
- Regularly attending an institution of higher education, a post-secondary vocational or technical program (minimum six hours per semester); or
- Actively participating in a program or activity that promotes or removes barriers to employment; or
- Employed for at least 80 hours per month; or
- Are incapable of doing any of the above due to a documented medical condition. (McDaniel et al., 2019, p. 1)

Young people realized a lack of access to an appropriate education might mean years of struggle, unemployment, and even homelessness (Havlicek, 2011; McCutcheon, 2010). Some (Havlicek; Salazar, 2013) have stated that society needs to look at this often-overlooked population's needs by student aid and post-secondary education systems.

### Conceptual Framework

Two theories provided the conceptual framework for this study. Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, and resilience theory as presented by several researchers (Luthar, 2003; Masten et al., 1990; Maltby et al., 2019; Richardson, 2002) became the lens through which the phenomena were examined.

To fully explore the reasons former FY leave college before they reach their intended degrees, it is helpful to look at how students think and process internal and external stimuli that

influence their decisions. Students decide on their life paths by examining what best serves their interests and then following a particular decision. One way to examine how a former FY is to look at the decision to leave college is by utilizing Tinto's (1988) work on student departure theory with resilience theory.

## Resilience Theory

The term "resilience" derives from the Latin word *resiliens*, or the pliant and elastic quality of a substance (Greene, 1991). Masten (2001) defined resilience as a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes despite severe threats from threats of adversity, frustration, and misfortune. As Richardson (2002) defined it, resilience theory considers the individual's circumstances and their desire/ability to rise above those challenges. The concept of resilience describes three different types of visual experiences: (a) individuals who have endured traumatic events but can recover well; (b) individuals belonging to high-risk groups and have more favorable outcomes than is expected for the situation; (c) individuals who show positive adaptation despite life stressors. Common themes within resilience theory are "optimism, attitude, emotional awareness, self-control, social support, sense of humor, high self-esteem, and flexibility" (Masten, 1990, p. 108). The study of resilient children have had the positive ability to overturn many of the negative assumptions and deficit-focused models of the developing youth maturing with the threats of disadvantage and adversity (Masten, 2001).

Early studies in resilience theory have identified specific characteristics across the lives of children that can predict successful social adjustment for those youth exposed to adversity early in life. These processes clarify how protective factors can promote positive adaptation (Wyman et al., 2000). This theory evaluates many risk factors, including those of mental health status of the biological parent on the child's wellbeing to how low socioeconomic status and

physical/mental abuse can affect the life lived of the adult who bore those sufferings as a child (Masten, 2001; Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Masten & Wright, 1998). FY often suffer these same upbringing variables; thus, utilizing this theoretical framework can accurately anticipate youth's possible outcomes in post-secondary education settings in terms of coping strategies.

Combining student departure theory and resilience theory helped construct the motivations and commitments in their decision to attend and persist in college. The combined theories explore student persistence based on their lived experience and the structural phenomenon on college campuses. The thought is that the more resilient factors a person has, the more likely they are to remain enrolled in higher education as they progress through the system and face setbacks and difficult situations. Please see Appendix A for a visual representation of the combined conceptual framework.

#### Tinto Student Departure Theory

The second guiding frame is Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, a theory of relationships and commitments. Tinto's theory is a framework that allows researchers to identify characteristics to determine the probability that students will leave education before obtaining their degrees. Tinto examined the strength of the relationship between the individual student and the institution as significant factors in deciding to stay in college or leave before earning their degree. He found that the foundation of family background, pre-collegiate education, and individual attributes, like locus of control, all play a role in determining the students' commitment to obtaining their degrees. Institutions must also invest in the student for the commitment to work. When the student faces hardships like poor academic performance, lack of cultural capital, or other negative interaction with faculty, staff, or other students, these interactions have a part in either increasing or decreasing the student's commitment to higher

education. When all these factors are laid out, they decide whether they will persist another semester or exit the institution without their degree.

Tinto (1993) found significant links between learning and persistence that affect the students' determination to continue their education or leave before obtaining their degrees. This involvement is the interplay between the quality of student effort and the student's interactions with an institution's faculty/staff. More positive associations between these two entities suggest,

There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence. (p.71)

In his study, Tinto's (1993) examined the relationship between the student's interaction with the environment and its relationship to the post-secondary institution and its other responsibilities. Specifically, he looked at peer-group interactions and faculty/staff interactions. Tinto found these interactions show critical aspects in the decision process. Relationships and commitments are between the student and the post-secondary institution to whom they belong and the relationship and commitments between the student and their peers.

Tinto's theory looks explicitly at the structures of the environment in which students utilized their own experience to help decide persistence within post-secondary education or premature departure from school. Tinto saw student departure as a fluid process that interacts with the student and their goals, aspirations, and motivations to attend college and complete a college degree. Tinto stated that factors inside the higher education institution (e.g., faculty and staff interactions; the amount of financial aid received; housing needs) coupled with the student's external environment (e.g., need to work, other obligations, housing needs) can and often do change the motivation to continue with school or to depart from school without receiving a degree.



## Other Theories

Utilizing Tinto's theory of student departure theory, Miller et al.'s (2017) study of relationships that determine student persistence found eight clusters of relationships that predicted retention. Those clusters included "campus awareness, advocacy, data tracking, pre-college supports, family connections, academic financing, campus life, and peer/mentor supports" (pp. 60, 62). Similarly, other respondents noted these particular relationships also functioned as a determining factor for their continued persistence in post-secondary education.

Haas and Graydon (2009) completed a study of 44 former foster youth about the internal and external resources that helped them to graduate from a post-secondary educational program. This study aimed to identify the characteristics of resiliency students relied upon to complete their education. When this article was published, the authors noted a limited amount of literature about the support available to these foster youths. The authors stated,

This study addresses this gap in knowledge by using a combination of formal questionnaires and open-ended questions to investigate how successful foster youth perceive themselves and account for their successes, particularly concerning the social supports available to them in the community and at school. (p. 458)

However, this study did not systematically examine the interactions between the student and the institution.

Neal (2017) presented an example in which respondents noted that they felt "well supported by their schools overall, [and] held a notion of responsibility for achieving academically and participated in positive activities throughout high school" (p. 244). Positive associations and interaction with school officials significantly impacted students' decisions to persist in their education. Neal used interviews to research high-achieving FY's experience to determine how they were successful in college. Her survey uncovered that out-of-home placements and other guardian angels helped mentor the youth and provide the youth's social

support to enter and continue college as problems surmounted and became too much for the student to handle alone. Neal determined that the “adults’ willingness to assist youth and be a part of their lives provided students with a transformative academic and social-emotional environment, furthering their ability to persist through high school and gain acceptance to a top-tier university” (p. 242). They developed a trusting and lasting relationship with adults who could guide them, just as Tinto suggested.

Watt et al. (2013) evaluated a newly designed campus support program based on Tinto’s work on student departure theory and positive psychology. They sought to “analyze quantitative and qualitative data collected before and during the first two years of the program operation to explore whether a strengths perspective can be successfully applied to the unique needs of foster care alumni in higher education” (p. 1408). Similarly, Miller et al. (2017) used concept mapping to develop a support program specifically for FY in higher education. Their goal was to utilize current students who are former FY to build a program that would address the student’s needs, both on-campus and off-campus. Miller et al.’s study emphasized the importance of interaction between the student and the university community in helping these vulnerable students persist through college. Miller et al.’s research suggested eight cluster solutions, “campus awareness, advocacy, data tracking, pre-college supports, fostering family connections, academic financing, campus life, and peer/mentor supports” (pp. 60, 62).

Based on positive psychological concepts, Garmezy’s resilience theory, founded in 1992, is series of protective factors that help mitigate adverse circumstances. When a person encounters a stressor or a life event, these protective factors can bring them back to homeostasis. In this theory, a stressor comes, taking the individual from in balance into chaos. This disruption can either lead to integration with loss or disfunction if resilience factors are not applied (Masten

and Garmezy, 1985). However, when these adverse stress events happen, a person can use those characteristics to reintegrate back to homeostasis and overcome those opposing challenges. Hines et al. (2005) concept of resilience can be equated with the concepts of grit or stick-to-it-ness. Hines et al. (2005) described resilience as “the process by which individuals achieve adaptive functioning in the face of adversity” (p. 381).

Hass and Graydon (2009) found that academically successful FY illustrated substantial care from other people and strongly appreciated others’ roles in their successes. For example, the youth in the Hass et al.’s study (2009) seemed to lack FY’s confidence in their ability to cope and view the world as unpredictable. Banyard and Cantor (2004) found that “exposure to higher levels of cumulative trauma are related to more negative college adjustments in the personal/emotional arena” (p. 215). They defined trauma as a “range of events that overwhelm an individual’s coping capacities and involves threats of serious injury or death to self or someone close to the individual” (p. 207). This definition encompasses the experience of FY’s experiences before enrolling in post-secondary education. Banyard and Cantor (2004) found that exposure to trauma is highly correlated to negative adjustment.

Hass et al. (2014) used resilience theory to study 19 former FY about turning points in their lives, leading them to complete college. The study results suggested, “that a sense of autonomy, social and instrumental support, and access to ‘safe-havens’ interacted to facilitate turning-point events in their lives” (p. 387). In this instance, resilience and Tinto’s student departure theories worked in combination to study how students remained in school despite overwhelming obstacles. These college students utilized positive interactions with the university faculty and staff, coupled with their strong desire to continue with the school to insulate these problems and overcome them. Haas et al. (2014) also found that “academically successful foster

youth FY appeared to have a solid commitment to helping others and giving back to the community” (p.388). Like Hines et al. (2005), this study found that educational resilience did not necessarily translate to resilience in all areas of life.

Rios and Rocco (2014) completed a phenomenological study on FY in post-secondary education in Florida. He was able to interview 24 former FY perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes. He found that the students felt that academic barriers limited the achievement they could have received. The respondents also noted that professors and staff at their institutions were not helpful or empathetic towards their unique circumstances. Rios and Rocco (2014) stated, “participants spoke of personal barriers experienced at school, in their FC placements, with peers and from within themselves” (p. 231). While this study did not explicitly utilize their proposed theories, the concepts within them are similar.

### Chapter Summary

Every year, thousands of students are removed from their homes and placed in the foster care system. Then, youth have suffered at least two traumatic events. The first event brought about an investigation from Child Protective Services. The second event was removing the child from the family. No matter how badly parents have treated youth, they are even more traumatized by their home removal. Banyard and Cantor (2004) showed that youth have difficulty adjusting to college when they have experienced traumatic events.

After exiting care, FY are responsible for finding appropriate housing for themselves and any children they might have had. Studies have shown that FY typically suffer from mental health disorders, are more likely to be involved in criminal activities, and commit more severe crimes. They suffer from housing instability and often report lower wages, typically living at or below the federal poverty lines. Academically, FY face an even more uphill battle. These youth

are transferred from one foster home to the next, and when this happens, they often must change schools. Research shows a typical FY changes placement at least five times while in care. These changes, coupled with the loss of educational records, overpopulation in special education classes, and gaps in learning, put students at a significant educational disadvantage. Even considering this, foster youth report the desire to go to college at noteworthy rates (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Courtney et al., 2011; Wolanin, 2005).

The combination of student departure theory and resilience theory is a unique way of learning how vulnerable populations utilize protective factors to stay enrolled in post-secondary education. As students matriculate through post-secondary education, they must traverse a series of challenges. Some of these challenges involve school-related events, like filling out the proper paperwork for the university. Some challenges are more related to personal life and the responsibilities of the student. How a student chooses to think about these challenges and how they utilize protective factors helps them see what kind of relationship the university should have with the student to insulate those protective factors. This student population potentially has not been able to develop these protective factors, so it is essential to understand which protective factors play a role in student persistence.

Attending college for FY is challenging at best. Staying in college is even more challenging. Most FY do not graduate college; most do not last more than one academic year. By the time the student reaches college, they might not have had the opportunity to learn self-advocacy or any basic skills needed to navigate the path of higher education. The present research study seeks to fill gaps in the literature by exploring from the student perspective and to help determine what colleges and universities can do to help retain more of this most vulnerable first-time, first-year population.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

*Resilience does not come from rare special qualities, but from the everyday magic of the ordinary, normative human resources of the mind, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and their communities.*

Ann Masten

Qualitative research seeks to accumulate information as a descriptor of a particular phenomenon rather than measurement. The data then identify patterns, predict potential outcomes, and express cumulative views and opinions. Qualitative research involves focus, interpretation, and a naturalistic approach to data analysis, giving insights into the research question. This hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study focuses on former FY and their experiences in post-secondary education. These students are experts in knowing the issues and problems faced by former FY in gaining access to and remaining in post-secondary education. It is the accumulation of these stories that allow institutions to understand the importance of creating a supportive environment where these vulnerable youth can obtain their degrees and lift themselves out of poverty, thus becoming more self-sufficient. The questions that guided this study were:

RQ1. What characteristics influence former foster care youth to enroll in college?

RQ2. What characteristics help former foster care youth persist in higher education until graduation?

#### Research Methods and Design

This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis as presented by Moustakas (1994). This approach to studying former FY in higher education allowed me to analyze strategic systems tasked with providing more opportunity to gain access to and graduate from post-secondary institutions. Through this approach, I explored

former FYs' lived experiences and their relevant experiences on a college campus in the southwest area of the United States. This point of view, housed in the constructivist perspective, metaphysically (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The goal of phenomenological research is to "focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47).

### Phenomenology Approach

The methodology is guided by Moustakas's (1994) hermeneutic phenomenology approach to a knowledge of human experience emphasizes that "it is a science of pure possibilities carried out with systematic concreteness and that it precedes, and makes possible, the empirical sciences, the sciences of actualities" (p. 72). This hermeneutical conceptual framework looks at the past from a reflective perspective to help understand life situations and choices. The research concerning how persons lived experiences helps to understand how foster care alumni and their educational and motivational experience for post-secondary education influenced future behavior. Phenomenology does not intend to predict outcomes. However, it helps determine the proper motivations and gives clues to these youth's persistence in future endeavors.

By looking at the person's lived experience, how they interpret past events, how they process their locus of control, it may be possible to extrapolate future persistence patterns within post-secondary education and the depth of a person's aspirational goals. The researcher must approach the topic of inquiry with an open mind, free of bias and prejudgments about potential answers (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology is essentially the study of real-life experiences (van Manen, 1997). It

poses how the person in the environment sees an experience (Kondrat, 2013). This lens then becomes the guiding “principle that highlights the importance of understanding an individual and individual behavior in light of the environmental contexts in which that person lives and acts” (Kondrat, 2013, p. 625). The context of the time, location, prior experience, and social influences all play a part in evaluating the experiences to which the researcher would like insight. This approach to research inquiry acknowledges that life does not happen in a vacuum and that all circumstances influence how one’s life is lived. These mundane, daily interactions are essential and worthy to be analyzed in studying the human condition. Therefore, evaluating student persistence in college through the context of a support program devoted to assisting the formerly fostered is a unique perspective missing in the literature. From this perspective, I evaluated universities’ processes and functions that hindered students from completing their degrees. Using the hermeneutic phenomenological method emphasized the importance of the person’s history and culture as the lens through which the research be examined.

Initially, I considered other modes of study as a research method. A quantitative study was not practical because the phenomena researched cannot be quantifiable into individual, non-subjective data points. The data in this research are highly subjective to interpretation and considers personal values and motivations. The case study model was also considered as a research method. In this model, data is collected from various sources and creates a more significant conclusion (Yin, 2012). However, this method was not utilized because I only looked at participant interviews. For this model to work, other stakeholders would have to be interviewed to get a more robust rationale for why the phenomena happened. The type of problem best suited for a heuristic qualitative study is one that the importance of understanding several individuals’ shared experiences becomes the unit of analysis (Criswell, 2007).



## Target Population

Nationally there are 430,000 youth in the foster care system at any given time. As of June 2019, there were 16,572 in the research area living in the foster care system. Some of these youth were taken from their homes and into the foster care system.

Former FY college students share traditional-age students' characteristics. However, these youth also shared a more significant number of characteristics more in line with non-traditional students. While the characteristics of age and social-economic status may be similar to traditional students entering college, these same students might be divergent in educational experiences and personal responsibilities. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), "the chief difference between the attrition process of traditional and non-traditional students is that non-traditional students are more affected by the external environment than by social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition" (p.485). This means that those students who more closely align with non-traditional characteristics have other responsibilities that take them away from the educational process. These non-traditional students are more affected by jobs, families, and other responsibilities when considering leaving post-secondary education. More traditional characteristic youth consider the institution's social/emotional connection as a litmus test of early post-secondary exit.

This research aimed to identify the nuances of former FYs' decisions in determining their continued participation in post-secondary education and how resilience played a part in the decision-making process. It was necessary to obtain information-rich participants who met essential selection criteria, from whom a "great deal about the issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 230) could be established. These rich data informed the

research question and developed better processes and support systems for former FY in post-secondary education.

### Sample

For recruitment, I approached a registered student organization dedicated to supporting the retention and graduation of formerly FY. This organization seeks to provide social support to students with medical, personal, and academic needs by highlighting youth the experiences of foster care. The organization, developed out of the Department of social work, is advised by social work faculty. I also used snowball sampling, which allowed organization members to recommend other participants. Boyd (2001) reports between two and ten participants is a sufficient number of interviews to reach saturation, and Creswell (1998) recommends “long interviews with up to 10 people” (p. 65) for a phenomenological study. While a sample size of 10 participants is ideal, only 8 people participated in the study.

The purposive sample consisted of students who fit the research criteria. Participants were initially recruited through contact with a student organization specifically developed to support foster care alumni. Once the individuals agreed to participate in the current study, snowball sampling took place to achieve the number of participants needed for saturation. Based on the purpose of the study, the students selected met the criteria of (a) having spent at least one year in foster care before reaching age 18, (b) currently attending the selected university for post-secondary study, and (c) being age 18 or older.

I used the experiences of eight post-secondary participants who met the stated criteria. These participants represented youth in each undergraduate education classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior status). By including youth in each classification, data from every college educational level was collected.

## Site Selection

The research took place at a state university in the southwest. This institution has a student population that exceeds 30,000 students and includes a mixture of racially and ethnically diverse men and women from lower to upper-middle-class families. The institution also states the value of making access to higher education available to students of various economic standings. This location provided ideal opportunities for students to connect with a thriving local economy, various housing styles, and many social service programs while attending a large public institution.

This study's institution recognizes the need to support FY as they traveled down their educational paths. Unlike most post-secondary institutions, this institution has made it a practice to identify those students who have aged out of the foster care system. This identification allowed the student to join an organization whose mission is to help former FY complete their post-secondary education. These organizational goals attempt to bridge the gap between the student's personal life and successful school completion.

## Data Collection

### Phase 1: Instrumentation Development

Issues of FYs have always been important to me. The need to increase FY post-secondary completion became a question of some significance after doing cursory research to see the actual numbers of FY's attendance and completion rates across the United States. I wanted to understand why more FY was not graduating from post-secondary institutions. Did they not express any desire to attend post-secondary education? Did institutions unknowingly place barriers for FY in getting admitted to post-secondary education? How did life circumstances and primary education fit into a student's ability to enroll in and complete post-secondary education?

These initial ponderings allowed me to formulate my overall research questions.

Next, I began to conduct an extensive literature review. I utilized Google Scholar to perform cursory journal searches. Terms such as “fostered youth and higher education;” “fostered youth and college;” “outcomes of foster care;” and “history of foster care in the United States” began the initial search into FY and college access and retention. These search terms were then read from the articles, and the references were reviewed to expand upon the literature. I then explored several journals to review their literature on FY in post-secondary education. I categorized the research articles into broad topics. These overarching themes in the literature became the history of foster care, outcomes of foster care, FY in post-secondary education, and persistence.

After reviewing the literature, I developed criteria for selecting participants. It was important to have as wide as possible the number of perspectives in youth in post-secondary education to cover every aspect of a student’s decision to enroll and graduate. I decided to include people who self-identified as having aged out of the foster care system, were over the age of 18, and either were currently or had been enrolled in post-secondary education at a particular institution in the Southwest United States. I then modified the university standard informed consent and completed the required IRB process for the intuition. However, the process had to be modified due to the coronavirus pandemic. Initially, I planned to complete face-to-face group interviews. However, this was changed to individual Zoom interviews because of participants’ schedules and preferences to complete interviews singularly. I developed instructions and open-ended, semi-structured interview questions based on what the literature noted were problems for FY’s ability to enroll in and complete post-secondary education.

## Phase 2: Data Collection

In data collection, it is crucial to set aside personal biases and prejudgments to allow for the data produced to become its truth and reality as much as possible (Moustakas, 1994). In other phenomenological paradigms, bracketing is used to ensure researchers are devoid of personal biases as much as possible. While this is sometimes difficult to accomplish, I needed to explore my personal feelings with the subject matter and work through those issues before completing data collection. The goal of this self-reflective evaluation sought to “meet something or someone and to listen and hear whatever is being represented, without coloring the other’s communication with my own habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing, removing the usual labeling or judging, or comparing” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89). It was essential for me to ensure an unbiased disposition in the research and interview processes.

It became imperative for me to evaluate personal conscious and unconscious bias when approaching the subject of former FY in post-secondary education as one who has familial experience. This evaluation started from formulating research, developing research reviews, formulating hypotheses, and evaluating the data. Allowing the research to speak for itself was the only way to understand and determine the following problem. Epoche was utilized through a series of reflective journaling to ensure each participant’s experiences did not affect the research. To truly understand the point of view of the research, epoche is critical.

Initial participants were identified by the membership of a student organization dedicated to FY in post-secondary education at the research institution in the Southwest United States. The student organization was given fliers to distribute to its members. From there, convivence and snowball sampling allowed for the remainder of the participants. Once participants were identified, I emailed the informed consent. The informed consent was signed and sent back to

me through email and locked in the electronic file. I then completed individual interviews through Zoom. Each participant was allowed to see the background of the room where the interview was conducted to ensure the students' identity would remain both anonymous and confidential. I then reviewed the IRB protocols again so that each participant had a verbal explanation of the scope of the research, possible side effects, as well as remind them that each participant would receive \$20.00 in exchange for their time. Participants were also reminded that their names, identifying the location, and personal details would not be included in the research; all original documentation would be stored in a locked electronic file where I was the only one with access. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

### Phenomenological Reduction

Describing what one sees in a textual language requires the researcher to look at the phenomenon with an open mind and consider different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). It describes the relationship between students' decisions to leave school and the experiences of the individual participant. By reviewing and re-reviewing the narrative text, the researcher puts forth the effort to get to the fundamental idea of the subjective experience and find the "genuine objective nature of things as realized by an individual" (Kalfe, 1993, p. 186). The process of phenomenological reduction allows researchers to avoid personal bias and hear the responses of the participants in a way that is respectful to their experiences. (Moustakas, 1994).

### Imaginative Variation

Imaginative variation is the next step in the research process. In this state, I looked at the phenomena using different lenses and points of reference. At this point of the process, intuition is imaginative and based on structural themes. These themes consider the participant's descriptions of the phenomena and the meaning of the experience. The themes then allow for

more in-depth exploration (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). This process allowed me to discover themes from the transcribed descriptions.

## Synthesis

Themes were analyzed by continuously moving back and forth between the literature and earlier analysis, moving from parts to the whole following an informed hermeneutic circle (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). The goal of synthesis at this stage of data collection was not to find results but rather to ensure that I had achieved data saturation. “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme, our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1997, p. 107). This process is explained more in the next section.

## Data Analysis

I chose the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis as described by Moustakas (1994). Consistent with Moustakas’s (1994) notion of *epoche*, I audio-taped and manually transcribed all interviews. After the preparation of each transcript, the participant reviewed the document for accuracy in language and context.

Once I confirmed the accuracy of the documents, listing and developing some preliminary grouping began by highlighting words and phrases that had the same meaning. This process sought to “list every expression relevant to the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120). In this process, every statement relevant to the topic and question has equal value. After that, I began to “list each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement” as these statements inform repetitive statements (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). After the initial analysis of highlighting similar experiences, the research then looked for independent statements to glean how these instances could inform the main words and phrases. Once the statements have been analyzed, the meanings

are then clustered into common themes. These clustered themes then become the textual descriptions of the lived experience. Finally, these statements were evaluated through the lenses of student departure theory and resilience theory.

### Validity and Reliability

The verification of data analysis concerned the generalizability, reliability, and validity of the findings themselves. Some researchers believe that verification happens throughout the process of data collection itself (Nowell et al., 2017). They believe that gaining data from respondents is an act of ongoing reliability and validity checks. Validity measures the accuracy of the study results; did the instrument measure what was supposed to measure—accomplished by comparing the results from the current study against other studies.

However, van Manen (1997) believed that a more appropriate way to ensure validity and reliability in heuristic phenomenological research compares itself with the concepts of orientation, strength, richness, and depth. The orientation then becomes “the involvement of the researcher in the world of the research participants and their stories” (Kafle, 1993, p. 196). Strength refers to the ability of the text to represent the primary intention of the participant’s stories. Finally, richness is intended to serve as the visual quality of the “text that narrates the meanings as perceived by the participants” (Kafle, 1993, p. 196). I actively sought to fully involve myself in the participants’ stories by using minimal encouragements, reframing what was said, and continuously seeking validation throughout the interview (Fink, 2000). These actions allowed me to invest in the participant stories fully. Continuously checking my understanding throughout the interview proves I was able to establish strength. In addition to these checks, the participants could review their transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Similar to ensuring strength, I assured richness by constantly checking for accuracy in my interpretation of the words spoken



during the interview process. Finally, depth was achieved by comparing the stories of the individual participants to each other. I wanted to see how many times the different participants repeated similar stories. I believed the more overlapping stories, the more accurate the information, and the research's breadth was achieved.

### Ethical Considerations

Because there is a pervasively negative stigma associated with the foster care system, it becomes paramount to have names, and other distinguishing information changed to protect privacy. As with any qualitative inquiry, each respondent must understand they are voluntary participants and can stop the interview process at any time. Each respondent was recognized and understood; because my affiliation with the institution is loose, there was no retribution or retaliation for completing or not completing the research project. The information gained from the respondents is being held in the highest confidence and solely used to determine how to better support students on their journeys through post-secondary education.

Unfortunately, former FY already had a high number of emotional and traumatic events. As the topic of foster care unfolded into discussions of life experiences before and during foster care, the students may have demonstrated symptoms of PTSD or anxiety in interview sessions. Having the students understand that if it became too hard to continue, they could leave the interview before the session officially ended. Each student participant needed to be treated with the utmost respect and sought cooperation throughout the entire research process. Consideration was taken to assure the least amount of trauma in the phraseology of the semi-structured interview questions. For students who expressed psychological distress symptoms brought about by the interview process, I provided the University Psychological Counseling Services' contact information.

## Researcher's Role

The researcher's role is described as a "moral enterprise," according to Kvale (1996). Whoever is conducting the interview forms relationships with the respondent. While interviewing, I used empathy to make the respondents feel more at ease and, therefore, more willing to tell their stories.

In qualitative research, the researcher's role is not nearly as distinguishable as it is brought forth in quantitative research (Fink, 2020). Students' experiences have been considered the instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In practical terms, this means data are reconciled through human instrumentation rather than through more sterile inventories, detached questionnaires, or other types of data collection. Qualitative researchers need to look at themselves, including biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences, to qualify their ability to do the research (van Manen, 1997).

For me, the concept of examining the persistence of former FY was borne out of a familial obligation to the formerly FY. My grandparents adopted their only child and instilled in everyone they met the passion for going to college and earning a degree. This research also attempted to honor those aunts, uncles, and numerous cousins who have come to be part of the family through adoption (formally or informally) and required the separation of passion and purpose to conduct the proceeding study effectively.

While each of these people came into the family in various ways, some were infants; some not; the fact remains that their inclusion in the family made them even more vital because they were there. In some ways, this research idea was intended to honor them. Not all of them went to college, but all of them had the desire to go. This research, then, attempted to understand the nuances of the decision to go to college from a very personal lived experiential level so that

more children who have aged out of the foster care system without being formally adopted or returned to their families can be supported in their decision to go to college and persist in college until graduation. While the family members were some lucky ones who found a forever family, thousands upon thousands of other children are not so fortunate every year.

My grandmother's funeral inspired this idea or concept of looking at those who have aged out of the foster care system and their college choices/experiences. My family stopped at the visitor's center in Oklahoma, and my father gave me a pamphlet about the orphan trains that ran through Oklahoma between 1854 and 1929. I started thinking about the education these children might have received due to their westward drive and if those children were even given the opportunity to go to college if they wanted to. This historical event caused me to think about the present day and if anything had changed from then to now. That's when I turned to study my family, looking at the FY compared to the adopted child. I wondered if the trends I saw in my own family were typical of national trends. I wanted to know why students decided to go to college and who helped them get there? I wanted to know what happened to these students during school breaks. I wanted to know how they got the motivation to get up every day and face a world that has not prepared them for the world. In essence, I wanted to find out the existing structures and change them for tomorrow's youth. I wanted more students to go to college and finish college, as well.

### Summary

The research findings from the study sought to expand on the current body of knowledge of FY in post-secondary education. The data analysis was completed utilizing the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological research as referenced by Moustakas (1994). The findings of this research are of particular importance to administrators in post-secondary

institutions as they may serve as a key to attracting and retaining more students who have exited foster care until graduation. From this research, institutions can create specific support programs or procedures to help this vulnerable population complete post-secondary education.

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the research design is the most practical way to study the phenomena because it is “focused on the subjective experience of individuals and groups. It is an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their lifeworld stories” (Klafe, 1993). Through this first-hand experience, I can evaluate why FY does not complete post-secondary education and the barriers post-secondary education unknowingly places on them and allows the institution to provide the most appropriate support programs to ensure more of this population graduates.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

*No matter how bleak or menacing a situation may appear, it does not entirely own us. It cannot take away our freedom to respond, our power to take action.*

Ryder Carroll

This qualitative study focused on former fostered youth (FY) and their experiences in post-secondary education. These students were experts in knowing the issues and problems faced by former FY in gaining access to and remaining in post-secondary education.

Two research questions guided this study. (a) What characteristics influence former foster care youth to enroll in college? (b) What characteristics influence former foster care youth to persist in higher education until graduation? To better understand the research questions, a series of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were developed. The conceptual framework of student departure theory and resilience theory informed these questions. These sought to explain how former FY came to higher education and how institutions supported or hindered graduation chances through the lenses of student departure and resilience theories.

#### Participants

Eight women between the ages of 18 and 28 participated in the study. Participants were selected based on meeting the following criteria. They were a) over 18, b) aged out of the foster care system, and c) currently or formerly enrolled in post-secondary education. Participants included one Caucasian, three African-Americans, one Native American, and three who identified as Latinx. Each of the participants completed at least one semester of college. The participants' average age was 21; the youngest participant being 18, and the most senior 28. Each participant graduated from high school in the spring semester and started university in the following fall semester. Eight participants completed a traditional high school program. One

participant attended an alternative high school solely completed in an online environment while living at home with her foster parents. Finally, one participant completed her first bachelor's degree and completed a second bachelor's degree in another area of concentration (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Classification	Major
Emily	22	Female	African American	Senior	Social Work
Barbara	21	Female	Caucasian	Junior	Psychology
Alicia	28	Female	Latinx	Junior	Geological Information System Criminal Justice (degree completed)
Jennifer	21	Female	African American	Junior	Social Work
Sarah	18	Female	African American	Freshman	English
Tiffany	20	Female	Latinx	Sophomore	Business
Heather	22	Female	Latinx	Senior	Business
Jordan	18	Female	Native American	Freshman	Undeclared

The remainder of this chapter is broken into three significant sections related to concepts from the combined theories. The first two sections are presented according to responses to the interview questions. The third section completes the chapter with concluding statements about the interviews and introduces the next chapter.

### Why I Went to College: Sense of Purpose

The challenges formerly FY overcome are overwhelming. These students lived in multiple housing placements, potentially received poor academics, experienced extreme poverty, lacked cultural capital, and sometimes experienced a severe lack of support (Wolanin, 2005; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Barrat and Berlinger, 2013; Barltholet, 1999; Blome, 1997;

Curry and Abrams, 2015B; Dworsky and Courtney, 2010; Geenen and Powers, 2007; Guypen et al., 2017). While these circumstances can easily dissuade students from attending post-secondary education, they can also provide the potential strength and determination they need to enroll in and complete their desired degree. Tinto's (1998) student departure theory begins with the students' influences and decisions to enroll in college. The question of motivation and personal desires is a natural beginning question for the study of FY in post-secondary education.

All participants displayed a sense of purpose when they decided to attend post-secondary education. They were determined to continue to break the pattern of dependency on social services, and they understood that education was a means to that end. When the participants considered the idea of college, they looked at two things. First, they looked inside themselves to determine what person they wanted to be. Second, they looked at the outside world and its possibilities. The participants then consulted the significant people in their lives to evaluate if this sense of purpose was a realistic path they could take. For example, Emily described why she came to college and was pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work.

My mom, my birth mom, was a crack addict. And I was in the hospital born with cocaine. I had cocaine in my system. So, it was like running through my system. So just like hearing all of that, I want to fight for people who can't fight for themselves, you know? Yeah, I know, it's super hard. Just learning about the turnover rates and burnout and all of that... It's just, it's sad, but it pushes me to do better in the field. So hopefully, I don't know. It's just like, something I want to do, something that is pushing me to go into a field that helps people, not just myself.

Research participants reported the situation they were born into and saw the path they did not want to travel. The students looked for ways to ensure a better life for themselves. Like the student above, Barbara, a junior psychology major, was also motivated to attend university because she wanted to pursue a better life than how she grew up. When she began her

coursework at the university, she was unsure of what to do, nor did she plan how to get through school. She said:

I am a first-generation college student, so my first instinct is to want to become way better than my past generation and actually succeed in some way. So, I just said, 'I'm going to go to college because I want to.' There's no actual reason. When I came to university, I had no plan, actually. It wasn't like I want to become this or that. Once I started coming to college, I realized it was just because I wanted to have a better life for myself and the children I have, if I have any.

Sarah's foster family believed post-secondary education was a requirement. Sarah always knew she would go to college, not only for herself but for the future she envisioned for herself. She stated:

Well, I love learning. And my family is very big on learning. My [foster] mom was a teacher. So, you know, it was kind of always the plan to go to college. And it's always been exciting to just know that I'm going to college to get that higher level of education. And [this university] is actually my mom's alma mater. Okay, so yeah, I definitely always wanted to go to college, but I've always wanted to be able to learn more and add more to my repertoire, I guess, especially to prepare me for life in general after college. So that, I think, would be my biggest reason why I wanted to go to college!

Jennifer, a junior social work student, was motivated to attend college because of her foster care system experiences and surviving a mass school shooting during high school. Jennifer was able to see the first-hand need for mental health services observing her classmates trying to deal with their harrowing experiences. Jennifer commented:

What made me want to go into college was my passion for helping people from me helping people through my experiences in the foster care system. I was also inside of the 2018 Stoneman Douglas school shooting. So, from having those kinds of experiences and helping others cope with it, it really was. It made me really want to go into social work. And that's what really led me to go into college.

Two of the participants were able to have social supports with significant people from the application process through graduation. Alicia smiled as she recounted her continued connection with the social worker who removed her from her birthmother's home, family members, and community to find the social support and emotional support to attend post-secondary education.



Well, going to college has always been something at the forefront of my mind. Then the people who had me [foster parents], before I turned 18, they put it into my mind that, you know, I should always want something higher for myself. College is not the be all end because you could obviously make \$100,000 and not go to college. But to always have it in your back pocket just in case something doesn't go your way.

Significant people like social workers and family held a significant role in Jennifer's getting enrolled in college. She stated:

I would definitely say I was encouraged by my advisor, for sure. Also, my social worker, I just kind of looked up to her and my family for that. Before my mom passed away, like I knew, how hard she worked and stuff like that. So, I would say, just kind of having inspiration from everywhere, just kind of seeing my family network with people, and my friends had me thinking, 'Oh, maybe I should.' Let me try to encourage others to do this too.

All participants utilized a variety of assets in determining their path to attend post-secondary education. They all analyzed the life they grew up in combined with several trusted individuals who helped them decide their post-secondary education participation. Social workers, foster families, and their lived environment helped form the commitment to begin and complete post-secondary education. The desire and the motivation to complete college were powerful. Sometimes, however, post-secondary education, like life, has barriers. They fall into these and come across all sorts of hazards along the way. For some of the students, those barriers began during the application process.

### Preparing for College: Application Process

Once the students decided to enroll in post-secondary education, they acted on their decisions. The second step in becoming a college student was traversing through the application process and the steps therein. When formerly FY begin the admissions process, they did not always have the language or know the proper steps. Bourdieu (1986) contended that cultural representations and social relationships account for social positioning. Fortunately, mentors helped them with the needed cultural capital and successfully guided them through the

application process. Sarah received a significant amount of help when she applied for college.

She stated:

When I was applying for college, I had an older sister who helped me. So, she showed me how to do stuff. And then my church helped me as well. I was just surrounded by a lot of people who wanted to go to college, so I always had someone to talk to. I was also very good friends with... the person who gets the highest GPA? The valedictorian? The valedictorian! I was friends with him, and he helped me, too. So, I went to [private university], and then when I realized that the voucher was not going to pay for them. So, I left and went to [state university].

Sarah was able to learn about admission standards and what she needed to do to enroll in college.

She was also fortunate to know about tuition and fee waivers formerly FY received to help them pay for college. Unfortunately, not all of the participants learned about the specialized funding that comes with exiting foster care. Only six of the participants knew about this funding. In the region of study, youth who age out of foster care are entitled to have the tuition and fees paid for any state school. This is why Sarah needed to change schools; she was not receiving full support for education.

In contrast, the most senior participant, Alicia, looked back on her first degree and reflected on her undergraduate student experience; she noted her mistakes.

I know the mistakes I made in my first bachelor's. I, unfortunately, was on academic probation every other semester. But now I know what I got to take care of first before I let that happen again. Especially because now the waiver is not paying for it anymore. So, I don't have any room to fail. I have four or five more friends in the same situation. We also experience the same things. If it wasn't for the waiver, we probably would have paid more for school physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We are very thankful for the waiver. Going through all we already went through, as somebody who was in a system getting tossed around, college would have never been in the forefront of our minds.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a complicated document to complete in and of itself. This document is even more difficult for formerly FY who are attempting to attend college. Jordan spoke of not knowing about deadlines and materials needed to complete the form.

I have to say the FAFSA was the most challenging. There was just a lot of information that I didn't know I needed, and I tried to get that quickly. Disbursement was also a really big issue for me. FAFSA didn't get something to the financial aid department before the payment due date. Basically, the school canceled my classes because my account didn't say I was getting money or that I was a former foster kid. So, yeah, that happened. But I managed to get them back the same day. I actually had a bit of a breakdown because I was like, 'Oh, my God, is this [attending college] for me?' That really made it very stressful.

The cultural capital of knowing about FAFSA and all the documents needed to complete it could be challenging when people do not have mentors or coaches teaching them the process and walking them through the steps. However, the waiver and FASFA only pay for tuition and fees. Students still need to apply for scholarships or look for work to pay for room and board. Like most high school students, writing more essay questions was not at the forefront of their minds. When thinking about how to pay for college, Emily did not apply for any outside scholarships.

Oh, yeah, there is just stuff that I could have applied for, and I just didn't. My mom, she really pushed for me to do all that stuff. But I was really rebellious. I was like, no, just because... I don't know why really. I was young. I should have, but I didn't.

### First Semester in College

From the decision to attend post-secondary education to registering for the first semester of school, former FY overcame significant challenges. From teachers and counselors to friends and family, these former FY depended on others to help them make decisions and guide them through entering college and making the best decisions for themselves. Jordan believed if there were a mechanism for all FY to be served by someone who can inform students about their available resources, it would make the admissions process much more straightforward. She stated:

I feel like if there is a system that would alert foster care students and people, "Hey, you know, you're eligible to have this benefit and that benefit." I feel like just reaching out to students because I had a lot of support in my life. But there are students that don't have

that, and they don't know where to go or who to contact. Just having a system where someone from the college or university say, "Hey, you know, you're eligible to have this grant! Reach out to this person for more information." Just giving them that sort of information so that they can figure out if they want it and how to get it, I think, would help immensely.

Alicia, like Jordan, believes a one-stop-shop for students would be beneficial to formerly FY. It would be a place on campus where students could go to have all their questions answered. However, the research showed that FY often have difficulty trusting others, forming relationships, and may have enduring relational wounds (Curry & Abrams, 2015B, p.146; Geenen et al., 2007; Wolanin, 2005, p. 14).

### Staying in Post-Secondary Education

Life interferences are always a challenge when navigating post-secondary education. Challenges come with personal lives, work lives, and social lives. All participants indicated several challenges they had come across since enrolling in college. -Participants reported home/personal life, some of those challenges involved managing obligations with work, childcare, and mental health issues. Participants discussed the challenges they had on a college campus, such as dealing with low test scores and navigating the post-secondary education system. The second part of Tinto's (1998) student departure theory looks at the relationships between the university and the student and the relationships between the student and their peers. Questions of staying in post-secondary education lend themselves to exploring these relationships and the reasons FY continue with their education.

### Facing Challenges

#### Work-Life/School-Life Balance

Jennifer spoke of having to balance everything in her life. She was driving to a job interview and participating in this research project simultaneously. Jennifer is attending school

full-time and working part-time as well. She felt like she could continue to do all that she needed to; however, life often gets complicated. When I asked her how she was making it through college currently, she replied:

I would say so far, just, you know, making and having those priorities. So, for example, since the beginning of college, I've always prioritized school a little bit more than typical workdays. The weekends were just the weekends, and that's when I worked. And that's it. And then Monday through Friday, I just, I wouldn't work at all, I would just focus on school and just study, and it's helped me a lot. Since this pandemic, I've had to work a little bit more. Hence, like I'm in the car right now. So, it's been a bit of a challenge to have been able to balance both. So, you know, I'm kind of just prioritizing both right now.

Jennifer must juggle work, school, and social life while trying to support herself financially. She understands this is a temporary situation she is in and believed that her attempts at balance would 'work out in the end.'

Heather also expressed problems trying to balance everything in her life. She is not only responsible for herself, but she is also a single mother of a two-year-old son. She spoke of the difficulty in raising a toddler while obtaining her education.

I just sometimes get really overwhelmed. Like there is so much stuff to do between me and [child's name]. Finding time to study and be a full-time mom is not easy at all. I love my son; he is the biggest blessing in my entire life. It's just really stressful. He's two years old and doesn't stop moving from the time he wakes up until he passes out. Most of the time, I want to pass out with him. But I can't cause I got this class or that class to study for or write a paper. I procrastinate most of the time because it's hard to focus and be self-disciplined when there's not someone looking over your shoulder. But I do what I gotta do. This degree is for him as much as it is for me.

## Financial Issues

As a junior social work major, it was time for Emily to complete her required internship. This process usually requires additional applications, insurance, and tests to obtain a social service agency placement. However, Emily did not apply for an internship at the appropriate time because she could not afford a semester with a diminished work schedule. Thus, Emily

missed the opportunity to complete her degree on time. Internships require the student to work at a social service agency for a set number of hours per week; this work is unpaid labor in most cases. In Emily's case, the agency requires a total of 400 clock hours of service in one 16-week semester placement. In this case, it averages out to about 25 hours of work per week dedicated to school activity on top of her other coursework, employment, and other life commitments. The need to spend so much time working at her internship does not lend itself to having the same amount of time to work for pay. The lack of financial support during these 16-weeks required her to save more money than usual to compensate for the decreased employment load she typically demonstrates. She stated:

I know where I want to do my internship, but I can't afford it right now. So, I have to save up money. I should have been doing that, but I couldn't. I have too many things to pay for that I'm not able to save like I should. So, I'm just going to do it [her internship] in the summer so I can be okay. But I'm still gonna have to work another job while completing the internship. So, I have to apply again for the spring so I can fit it into summer. But in the end, it will all work out.

## Mental Health

Feelings can play a significant part in students' motivation and confidence in completing their post-secondary education. Recognizing those feelings and managing those feelings, whether good or bad, significantly correlate to student displays of resilience (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Hass et al., 2009; Hines et al., 2005). Heather recalled how failing an exam in a core class affected her mental health the rest of the semester.

I have never been good at math. I had to take remedial math when I came to college. So, when I went to college algebra, I was nervous! I failed that first test, and it really did me in. I lost all my confidence. My anxiety got so high that at one point in time, I wanted to go on meds for it. People were talking me down from it because they're addictive. I want to go into the medical field, and I feel like, with the way my ADHD is set up, I would never make it far in the medical field. So yeah, it does bother me. I ended up not going on medicine, but that whole semester was really stressful and made me feel some type of way, especially when I thought about the next math class.

Alicia reflected on how her therapist kept her grounded over her lifetime and reminded her to utilize the coping mechanisms she learned in therapy as she progressed through post-secondary education.

If I didn't have my therapist, I probably wouldn't even be here, not gonna lie to you. So, because of her and because of how she helped me as a troubled child. I was like, 'Oh, I want to do the same thing she did, and I want to give back to the kids that's in the system.' So, at first, I was going for psychology. Then I realized there's no money in psychology at all. Yes, I want to give back, but I need to be able to live!

## Overcoming Challenges

### Mentoring

Continuing with the concept of mental health awareness in post-secondary education, Jennifer addressed the need to be emotionally aware as a factor in continuing enrollment in post-secondary education. Heather and Alicia utilized mental health practitioners to help them manage symptoms of stress. For Jennifer, academic advisors and professors established a mentoring relationship to help manage stress and gain confidence in her abilities to overcome obstacles. She shared:

Understanding the need for emotional support for me was really important, for sure. Because I was really nervous going into college. My advisor provided a bunch of resources and answered every question I had. Whenever I even have appointments, I'm always prepared. I'm usually very prepared for appointments, and I always have everything in check. I'm like, Oh, I want to take this class. Is it good? Like that sort of situation. She also told me so many opportunities I can gain while I'm in college, not really as a freshman, but more as against a sophomore-junior level. And, you know, I've had so many opportunities, like, I just want to give that to other people. Like my advisor was really, really good. And it was nice because she was also my professor for the intro to college course. I'm still pretty close with her to this day. She's not an advisor anymore, but honestly, she helped me so much transition. I would say she was probably the one who helped me gain confidence.

### Support Programs

Students who find themselves academically struggling may decide to help manage their

anxiety by participating in support programs like tutoring. At the institution of this study, tutoring is free and readily available for students. Research participants did not express their need for formalized structured tutoring. However, they thought the university provided significant help for those who needed it and did a good job marketing its availability. Some participants found solace in other specialized support programs sponsored by the university. These special support programs aim to work with the student and give them the encouragement and support they need to continue progressing. Heather said:

Whenever I'm just at my wit's end, I would say my (Student organization) coach really helps. From our first meeting, she has been there for me. She has helped me in so many different ways. Academically she's helped and with the whole tuition thing with the waivers. I know that I can go to her if I need a textbook or if I need a desk at home. She has been the one person here at school. If I don't know where to go, I ask her. I know if I send an email, I'll get an answer the next day. I don't even schedule appointments. I just come and sometimes hang out at her office. There are other former foster kids there too. It's like, you don't have to say anything. Like, you know all the [crap] we been through. We don't gotta say anything about it. We just get each other and help each other out.

Jennifer thought about her higher education experience and the importance of support in obtaining her degree.

Like, I didn't even know there are resources for foster care youth until, I would say, maybe my second semester of college because my advisor works closely with those students. And I didn't even know that [she worked with FY] until she told me like, the second semester. She was like, 'Okay, now since you're adjusted, let me tell you about the resources available to you.' I was like, Oh, wow. I didn't know there was tutoring available to me for free. I didn't know I could get help paying for my textbooks. I didn't know I could use them as a resource for stuff I needed at home or in my personal life. Like, I was blown away by all the stuff that they had to help me get through college. All these resources the school had, I had no idea they were there.

After that, I kept in touch with my advisor. She would not only care about my grades and my classes, but she cared about me as a person. Like, she really cared about me. Every appointment, she would check to make sure I had what I needed at home. If I needed something, I knew I could just email her, and she would get back to me.

When I asked Alicia about other university support that would be helpful to increase the support formerly FY should be exposed to have more students graduate from post-secondary



institutions, she mused:

I think something that could help too is maybe having maybe a yearly conference with the college students and have everybody share their experiences. I also think mental health is very big; like I said earlier, my therapist was really instrumental for me getting into and finishing college. I think that, unfortunately, in the foster care system, the first thing they want to do is prescribe depression pills. Every child gets it like it's popping candy. I think that's sick. I think it needs to be, you know, like a weekend or maybe a spa where we can get together with other kids who are or were in the system, and we can support each other. Only we know what it's really like on the inside, and we can build each other up. We can sort of, like, form a community that's voluntary. People already in college can mentor kids trying to get there. You know, like each one, teach one type of thing. I think that would be really helpful. We could also see if we have a family member because we get separated from our siblings sometimes. It would be nice to see if we could find our families at that meeting. So, I think it'll be awesome.

#### Other Students

Every day students encounter new experiences and new obstacles to overcome. When participants come across new and unfamiliar requirements, they can lean on those social supports like applying for the internship. These social supports help educate them on how to proceed through the next steps in post-secondary education, but it gives them the confidence to ask questions.

Emily received support when applying for her required internship. She was able to connect with other social work students and learn about applying to internships. Emily stated:

The kids in my class, you make group chats, and they've been talking about their internship and the process. That's just been really cool. Because I won't get to experience it until the summer semester, but it's just really cool. Everyone is like, we're on the same goal, and we help each other if we don't understand something in the interview process. Just reading that is really cool and calms my nerves. Like I don't know what I'm doing, but neither does anyone else. We're all kinda learning together, and I can ask questions, and it not be, like weird or anything. It's just really cool.

Heather, a senior business student, was the most optimistic about completing her degree. She was in the middle of completing an internship with a large corporate bank. She said:

Oh, gosh. I am so close to finishing. I can almost taste it. I kinda feel like my life is about to start for real. Like on my terms. This accounting job at [bank name] has really opened

my eyes to what is possible. I know I can finish my last semester, I know how to manage my time. I feel like I have my feet on the ground. Like, I finally know what I'm doing. Now, that might change at graduation! But right now, I'm so excited! It doesn't hurt that I just made an A on an accounting test!

### Conclusion

These eight research participants were very willing to discuss their journey through post-secondary education as they saw the benefits afforded to those who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher. They understood the consequences of simply growing up in the foster care system and the correlation of highly negative potential. For these participants to share their experience to inform the academy about the nature of foster care youth's experience in post-secondary education fit into their purpose of attending school (helping others). However, three participants did not want to use pseudonyms in place of their actual names. These three students wanted the academy to know precisely who they were and why their story was important to the larger community. These stories are essential and can help frame future research. I explained to them that their actual names could not be used because of confidentiality.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

*Your future is created by what you do today, not tomorrow.*

Robert Kiyosaki

Even though youth who grew up in the foster care system have experienced many barriers and challenges in achieving post-secondary success, they still desire to attend post-secondary education. Lovitt and Emmerson (2009) reported that 70 % of FY reported a great desire to continue their schooling by attending post-secondary education as a means of ensuring a better life. However, as high as 79% of high school FY express a desire to complete their college degrees (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Courtney et al., 2011; Wolanin, 2005). While no other study reports on these potential post-secondary attendees' aspirations, many feel optimistic about their success in post-secondary education (Auslander et al., 2003; Geiger & Beltran, 2017, McMillen et al., 2003; Shin, 2003). These students are experts in knowing the issues and problems faced by former FY in gaining access to and remaining in post-secondary education. Using semi-structured open-ended questions, I accumulated stories of both the motivations and the characteristics of persistence this vulnerable population used to attend and remain in post-secondary education. It was the accumulation of these stories that allow institutions to create a more supportive environment so that vulnerable youth can obtain their degrees and lift themselves out of poverty.

By utilizing the modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data analysis, I constructed a “composite of textural-structural descriptions of the meanings and essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). These themes are presented in four parts in this chapter. The first part of this chapter discusses the themes that emerged during the

analysis of the findings. The second returns to the literature to examine the student responses utilizing theory. In this section, I discuss how both resilience theory and student departure theory show themselves in the students' desire to attend and continue with post-secondary education when issues of money, mental health, and work-life balance threatened the decision to stay in school. Next, the research questions themselves and how the theories presented meshes with participant interviews and either supports or does not support the prevailing literature are mentioned. In the last section is a discussion how this research fits into the more extensive literature scheme and what future research should entail before presenting a conclusion and parting thoughts.

### Emerging Themes

Several themes emerged by utilizing the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis, as Moustakas (1994) indicated. After analyzing the responses, the themes of optimism, attitude, emotional awareness, and social support were the most prevalent. All themes were consistent with the conceptual framework.

#### Optimism

Optimism, as defined by Reivich et al. (2005), is the “realistic thinking style and positive coping skills [utilized to] promote resilience and buffer children from internalizing problems” (p. 203). Optimism is the ability to look at problems or negative situations and project a sense of calmness or a sense of everything working out. Optimism sees the possibilities of greatness despite current circumstances. When looking at the participant's responses to the possibility of their enrolling and continuing education to the post-secondary level, the students, who are in many instances' potential first-generation college students, showed their enthusiasm for the possibility of completing the unknown. Like Barbara, the junior psychology major, other

participants were motivated to attend a university because she wanted to pursue a better life than how she grew up to show optimism. Jennifer also displayed a great deal of optimism when she described the people in her life who had influenced her to stay enrolled in college after not doing well on an exam. Whether they were starting on their post-secondary journey or completing it for the second time around, every respondent spoke very specifically and optimistically about the future they wished to pursue.

All student participants demonstrated optimism as outlined resilience theory when they looked toward their future and the option of helping themselves and helping the community around them. Richardson's concept of resilience theory (2002) considers the individual's circumstances and their desire/ability to rise above those challenges because they are "individuals who have endured traumatic events but can recover well" (p. 317).

While Banyard and Cantor's (2004) study found that exposure to trauma before admission to post-secondary education is highly correlated to negative adjustment, the participants of this study used these past traumatic events to spur their optimism in obtaining a degree and overcoming current and future challenges. They defined trauma as a "range of events that overwhelm an individual's coping capacities and involves threats of serious injury or death to self or someone close to the individual" (p. 207).

For these young people, who have experienced the trauma of the foster care system, the hope that they could make a difference was what they needed to allow them to traverse the challenges associated with entering college. Participants who faced circumstances beyond their control, like Emily, who could not complete her internship at the appropriate time due to financial issues, still displayed optimism when she concluded, "But in the end, it will all work out." The participants who were able to categorize their problems into a larger framework and

“put it in perspective help students view the future with greater realistic optimism, and it also increases their self-efficacy for dealing with anticipated negative events” (Tan & Tan, 2014, p. 231).

### Attitude

The participants’ attitude also influenced their decision to go to and remain enrolled in post-secondary education. Sometimes the student’s sheer attitude of ‘stick-to-it-ness’ of wanting and needing to finish is the only reason why students were willing to go to college and complete their education. Werner (1992) found that a positive temperament did not necessarily reduce adverse outcomes a person encounters throughout their lives. However, it did predict positive adjustment to unfavorable circumstances by age 32. These students who developed the attitude of determination, then developed positive attitudes toward themselves and life. These students used attitudes as a protective “factor that neutralizes exposure to risk” (Ledesma, 2014, p. 2).

When asked about their experience and what they wished they had known before coming to college, Tiffany said, “I mean, you have to learn on your own and which I already got. There is not anything I wish I would have known; I’m just kind of just experiencing it.” While Barbara stated, “I know higher education is a scam, but I also know that it is the only way to get ahead in this country. So, I keep plodding along with this degree.”

### Emotional Awareness

Feelings can change the attitude of a person very quickly. Emotions become the lens by which people make decisions. By recognizing and managing those latent emotions, students can better process the experiences they are facing. Jennifer spoke of her need for emotional support in continuing her degree. She stated she was very nervous about attending college in general and specifically had a great deal of anxiety about her ability to complete the coursework. Jordan

spoke of her ADHD and the stress of thinking about taking medicine to manage her disability combined with her intended career path. Alicia was very explicit in her need for emotional awareness when she discussed how large of a role her therapist played in her decision to enroll in post-secondary education and her academic advisors' support in continuing towards graduation.

Jordan's (2005) study states, "girls, in particular, begin to lose their voices between the ages of 11 and 13. As a result, there are massive drops in self-esteem and rates of depression increase" (p. 86). Jordan (2005) suggested that instead of helping women, particularly women who are persons of color, examine their emotions so that they are more readily able to "examine the message and the immediate context and larger sociopolitical context. Thus, with disempowering messages, one does not get caught up in reacting, but examines and thinks carefully about the evidence for the message or stereotype" (p. 86). As these formerly FY processed feelings of inadequacy and unfavorable circumstances that arose, they needed to put the happening into the larger context of goals and evaluate the message or circumstance concerning their future decisions. The participants in this research project evaluated their attitudes and developed resiliency to continue their paths when problems came up.

### Social Support

Research suggests students do not wish to depend upon anyone who perpetuates the dominant cultural values of "rugged individualism and personal autonomy" (Curry & Abrams, 2015A, p. 146). The ability to attend a post-secondary institution requires students to have the ability to make independent decisions and to also advocate on their own behalf. In addition, they also need to be able to manage finances, navigate the health care system, find appropriate housing, and reliable transportation. Up to this point in the FY's life, they have depended on a caseworker or some other government officials to regulate these issues (Wolanin, 2005). For

many FY, the transition from dependence to independence is an incredible obstacle even before adding in the stressors of coursework, lectures, and exams.

Close interpersonal relationships and effective social support contribute to better outcomes for children. Cicchetti et al.'s (1993) study found that the maltreated children in their study who displayed positive long-term adjustment drew on fewer relational resources and displayed more restrictive emotional self-regulation styles than did comparison controls who were not maltreated. Resnick et al., (1993) and Resnick et al, (1997A) study of 12,000 adolescents proposed "the single best predictor of resistance to high-risk behaviors (violence, substance abuse, and suicide) is 'having a good relationship' with one adult, such as a teacher, parent, or mentor" (Jordan, 2005, p.80).

All of the research participants noted the social support they received in their decision to attend post-secondary education and complete their degree. Students relied on original and fostered families, friends, their social community, and the university supports in the forms of academic advising, transitional clubs or organizations, and mentors and professors as those supporting communities who helped them obtain their degrees. In most cases, social support did not come from one place notably, but a combination of people who supported their college education dream. Dumont and Provost (1999) found that adolescents who had more robust developed social support provided a more significant protective factor when areas of stress, anxiety, and depressive situations arose.

The students in this study were able to use the protective factors of resilience to cope with everyday academic life stressors. Thus, they could mitigate negative institutional experiences by utilizing "optimism, attitude, emotional awareness, self-control, social support, sense of humor, high self-esteem, and flexibility" (Masten, 1990, p. 108). These protective factors then allowed



the respondent to reintegrate back into post-secondary education, thus lowering their likelihood of leaving education before earning their intended degree. It combines both the theories of resilience and student departure that explain students' decisions in departing post-secondary education for formerly FY.

Werner (2005) found that "just as risk factors tend to co-occur in a particular population (i.e., children of poverty) or within a particular developmental period (i.e., adolescence), protective factors are also likely to occur together to some degree" (p. 93). The co-occurrence of the protective factors of attitude, emotional awareness, social support, and optimism allow students the protective factors needed to preserve.

While these themes are important to note, it is not resilience theory alone. In conjunction with student departure theory, resilience theory is a more informative way to evaluate this specialized population's persistence. As students are determined to enroll in post-secondary education and then matriculated through post-secondary education, students traverse the 'stages of passage' (Tinto, 1988). The first stage in "the college career, separation, requires students to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the past communities, most typically those associated with the local high school and place of residence" (p. 443). The participants often did not have the ties that Tinto usually associates with students entering post-secondary education in their unique perspective. The participants no longer had homes to return to. They did not have structured environments associated with positive thoughts, feelings, or stability. As Tinto (1998) suggested, students want to return. The stakes for these students are much more profound, and these students realized how much of their futures depend on the degree for which they enroll. All participants saw post-secondary education as a way to give their lives purpose. The participants lived through emotional traumas, challenging situations and

had the help they needed to endure through high school graduation. Their lived experiences gave them the motivation needed to transition to some new stage of development. These participants had lived a life of transitions and instability. Instability was something to which they are accustomed. Wolanin (2005) believed that these youth are

subject to two traumatic experiences: the neglect or abuse that brought them to the attention of the authorities and the removal from their family. Some are traumatized a third time by the treatment they receive while in the foster care system (p. ix).

After the FY is “incorporated into the college community” (Tinto, 1998), the student transitions to “finding and adopting norms appropriate to the new college setting and establishing competent membership in the social and intellectual communities of college life” (p. 443). This is the season where students experience their lack of cultural capital of college knowledge. However, the participants in this study overcame those challenges by leaning on people within academe. The participants leaned on their academic advisors, their professors, and other students to learn terminology and how processes and systems worked. Sarah spoke of learning how to navigate the financial aid processes and the FASFA. In this development stage, students looked at the relationship they have with the university and the relationship developed with peers who helped influence changing attitudes and beliefs about post-secondary education. Tinto (1988) believed that if a student does not receive assistance in navigating the system and becoming integrated with student life and intellectual memberships, it “may lead to transfer or permanent departure from higher education” (p. 447).

These themes serve to answer the research questions, and each one will be discussed and their relationships to the results, conceptual framework, and related research literature. However, it is important to reiterate how student departure theory and resilience theory work in concert. As students’ progress through the combination of student departure theory and resilience theory,

three pre-college attributes help influence a student to attend post-secondary education. Those determinates are family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. Each of these individual attributes weighs on the student's decision to attend post-secondary education. The student may not have all three of these components and still decide to attend college. Once the student commits to attending post-secondary education, the student must put those intentions into action. If and when the student runs across problems, resilience theory and its protective factors can help them overcome those challenges and maintain momentum in their desire to attend college. If the student exhibits continued optimism, has social support from family or others, and is aware of their emotions, problems can be mitigated. The goal of post-secondary education can remain.

By the same token, once a student is admitted to college, the relationship between faculty/staff interactions, academic performance, extra-curricular activities, and peer group interactions becomes critical. The relationship between a student and the institution's commitments influences the students' decision to continue or leave post-secondary education before graduation. When the student is committed to their education, the school is supportive, and peer networks are positive, academic and social integration in post-secondary institutions suggest that students are more likely to be retained. However, if one of these interactions is negative or the student starts to waver on their commitment to education or external commitments, it leads them to reevaluate their goals and commitments to post-secondary education.

At this time, students are the most vulnerable to depart from the university before receiving their degree. This re-evaluation of intentions, goals and external commitments becomes the time when resilience protective factors step in to insulate the student from the desire

to quit. If the student has people around them to motivate them to continue in their work (support system), the determination (attitude), and remembers their intent for going to college (optimism), a student is more likely to persist. It is the combination of these protective factors in resilience theory that informs student departure theory.

### Research Question 1

*What characteristics influence former foster care youth to enroll in college?*

The first research question sought to explore the motivations of students deciding to enroll in post-secondary education. As such, the interview's first questions established the relationship of the family, individual attitudes, and pre-college schooling. These three attributes were the beginning decisions in deciding and acting on the desire to attend post-secondary education. These questions also indicated what resilient protective factors might be in place to help support that decision. Utilizing the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological reduction as described by Moustakas (1994), several overarching themes emerged.

#### Deciding to Enroll

##### *Sense of Purpose*

When thinking about enrolling in post-secondary education, students utilized various reasons to go to post-secondary education. Generally,

some students may be more concerned with the intrinsic benefits of college (e.g., learning, affiliation, development, autonomy), while others are more concerned with the perceived extrinsic benefits of college (e.g., income, occupation, further education). However, not all students are clear in their reasons for attending college. (Tinto, 2017, p. 256)

All participants had a developed sense of why they wanted to enroll in post-secondary education. They were first-generation college students, which meant their family backgrounds also helped to undergird the students' resilience and optimism for obtaining their degrees. This commitment

towards graduation was firm and mentioned by Emily when thinking of her crack-addicted mother; Jennifer, when thinking about her mother who passed away and caused her to end up in the foster care system; and Sarah, when thinking about the emphasis her foster mother placed on her about getting an education. These significant relationships in the participants' lives helped steer the motivation to attend post-secondary education. "Students have to want to persist and expend the effort to do so even when faced with the challenges they sometimes encounter" (Tinto, 2017, p. 255). Not only does this early commitment to post-secondary education fit student departure theory as a foundational requirement to enroll, but it also fits resilience theory's critical themes of optimism, social support, and attitude. Optimism about what the future could hold for them, the social support of those who supported the idea of post-secondary education, and the attitude of determination showed up in their desires to complete post-secondary education and throughout the application process.

Tinto (2017B) stated,

some students may be more concerned with the intrinsic benefits of college (e.g., learning, affiliation, development, autonomy), while others were more concerned with the perceived extrinsic benefits of college (e.g., income, occupation, further education). Nevertheless, not all students are clear in their reasons for attending college. (p. 256)

Student departure theory examines the pre-entry attributes of family background, skills, abilities, and prior schooling to predict entrance into post-secondary education. These predictive values can be measured more precisely if conjoined with the evaluation of resilient protective factors. Students may have one or two of the student departure pre-entry attributes; however, those protective factors in resilience may help the student overcome those challenges.

### *Application Process*

After the student decides to enroll in post-secondary education, the student moves towards goal commitments. The student will inevitably encounter obstacles; goal commitments

are tested. Obstacles such as proper FAFSA completion and distribution, the need for work/school balance, understanding college-specific terminology, understanding what institutions could accept tuition assistance, and navigating the university all become salient in the decision to remain in post-secondary education. The participants in this study genuinely had a support system that allowed them to express their optimism and have more self-confidence in their ability to commit to and succeed in post-secondary education. Older siblings, church members, and high school classmates taught the participants how to navigate available post-secondary education systems foreign to them. Social workers and foster parents even supported four of the participants in applying for post-secondary education. These significant people supported the skills and abilities with their pre-entry attributes, which affected the students' goal commitments.

As students enroll in and progress in their intended degree programs, they constantly evaluate and re-evaluate their place within higher education. By combining resilience theory with student departure theory, researchers are more accurately and consistently able to predict students' changing goals and commitments to post-secondary education. The persistence factors of social support, optimism, attitude, and emotional awareness constitute the most prevalent student retention factors.

## Research Question 2

*What characteristics help former foster care youth persist in higher education until graduation?*

Once students are accepted to the university, the focus shifts to institutional experiences and integration. The challenges of prior schooling, skills, and abilities are then tested in academic performance and extra-curricular activities and their integration into how those relate to their re-evaluated goals and commitments to post-secondary education. Students faced with

low grades under challenging courses must evaluate their interest in overcoming the challenge. The universities are committed to helping them overcome the challenge and interactions with their peers in receiving help. All these external factors are weighed with the student's protective resilient factors to determine the next course of action, namely, withdrawing from the class or institution or finding solutions to their problems and persevering. For students currently enrolled in college courses, it was essential to have some direction in the paths they want to take. Their optimism fueled their drive, and their drive fueled their optimism. No matter if the student was extremely busy, readily saving for an internship, or preparing for life after college, these participants' optimism was a catalyst to continuing with their education. If they could see it, they could be it. Again, utilizing the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological reduction as described by Moustakas (1994), several overarching themes emerged.

### Facing Challenges

All the participants faced some challenges as they matriculated through post-secondary education. These situational challenges included balancing work, school, and life. Ensuring funding for classes, food, and housing for themselves and their children were also essential responsibilities that sometimes drew their attention away from education. Other participants managed their mental health issues. While these obstacles could have overwhelmed the participants to the point where they needed to leave school, they relied on the institution's connection to overcome their challenges. Tinto (2017B) believed that the support from advising offices, mental health counseling, and mentoring programs are often helpful to low-income first-generation college students. He suggested that possibly cohort models of education and other shared learning experiences could provide crucial social support within the group. Allowing the

students to utilize their institutional and peer resources maintained their commitment to the university. Their resilience characteristics were supported.

### *Work-Life/School-Life Balance*

Three of the participants mentioned their issues attempting to balance work, school, and other things for which they were responsible. Two of the participants spoke of their children. It was challenging for them to care for young children while attending classes, working, and being parents. For these students, external commitments played a significant role in their decision to remain enrolled in college. Tinto (2017A) recognized the need for low-income, first-generation students to manage education with other responsibilities. Often these students are, on average, less likely to complete post-secondary education than full-time, non-first-generation students (Pell Institute, 2015). Shifting priorities pull students in directions that are not always directed towards education. However, these research study participants relied on social support and enduring optimism to maintain post-secondary education commitment.

### *Financial Issues*

Hines et al. (2005) and others recognized former foster youth are “among those least likely to attend college, the attainment of a college degree could contribute to their future financial stability” (p. 382). Nevertheless, only if they finish that degree. Formerly FY who start college and do not finish their degree could have the added burden of college debt without the potential salary needed to cover those expenses.

The research participants also made a note of struggles with finances. Three participants discussed finances as a struggle they faced while attending college. Two participants need to support themselves and their children. Emily is working solely to support herself. However, she still finds it challenging. Her inability to support herself caused a delay in her graduation solely



because she cannot afford to work a semester at a social service agency without pay. She still needs to pay for her apartment, food, clothes, transportation, and adulthood requirements. In the face of such trials, these students were optimistic about the future and their place in it. They understood these problems as temporary.

### *Mental Health*

Three of the participants mentioned managing their mental health status while completing their degrees. These mental health issues manifested themselves as generalized anxiety disorder and ADHD. One participant acquired a therapy dog to help manage her anxiety. She noted that life with her service animal was helping her to recognize and manage her anxiety correctly. Wolanin (2005) reported that even one year in foster care is considered a “significant length of time and has a significant impact on the development of adult competency, mental health, and opportunities for higher education” (p. 5). Banyard and Cantor (2004) examined the resilience of trauma survivors and said that these students who enter the classrooms can help mitigate the emotional trauma and mental health crisis if they employ protective factors. Some of these protective factors include positive coping strategies, positive social supports, and a “reappraisal of the stressor such that individuals feel they have been able to learn something positive from the experience which creates a positive impact on their adjustment” (p. 204).

Work-life/school-life, finances, and mental health issues are three factors that came out in the research as potential obstacles that could separate the student from the university. While these situations can be challenging to overcome, the study participants utilized various on-campus resources to ensure those negative attributes did not sabotage their post-secondary education.

## Overcoming Challenges

### *Mentoring*

Tinto (2017A) suggested that first-generation and low-income students may transition into post-secondary education and be more successful in school if there are more structured environments to learn and grow together by building in a support system. Mentoring could be an effective way to build formerly FY's self-confidence moving into the whole new world of college. Mentoring "can help bolster protective factors that are associated with positive adaptation for all students" (Banyard & Cantor, 2004, p. 205). Mentors do not have to be professional staff. Hines et al. (2005) said encouragement from others, especially teachers, helped reduce potential negative impacts. Mentoring is used by agencies and youth programs to bolster social support most often (Hass & Graydon, 2009).

Three of the participants spoke of their academic advisor's support and faculty's support in helping them adjust to life in post-secondary education. Jennifer was able to use these university relationships to ground her and manage her stress levels. These university professionals were also able to guide her to other university supports for the student's usage. When the participants went to see their academic advisor, they were informed about the various support opportunities that could help them in their private and professional lives. These crucial relationships can help set up a student on a path of success or leave the student with more anxiety and insecurity.

### *Support Programs*

On-campus support programs became critical to the success of low-income, first-generation college students in this research study. These programs were instrumental in meeting the students, providing resources for them in tutoring, textbook stipends, and even helping with

their home lives. Not only did these support programs help give the student a safe space to learn from each other and acquire mentors, but these support programs created an instant family; an instant support group on campus so that they can create an identity of a college student. The participants were even able to utilize their peer group networks in learning how to navigate the system of higher education.

Colleges should offer a large range of first-year academic support programs to various student populations. Research suggests the most programs directly connect to or are contextualized in the individual courses the students are enrolled in (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Perin et al., 2013; Perin, 2014; Tinto, 2017A). The respondents to this research spoke very highly of the formalized support programs with which they were involved. Support programs gave students a one-stop-shop to get all their questions answered. The students created a trusting relationship where they felt safe and accepted for who they were.

Even when asking the participants directly how the university could support formerly FY more, one participant said she would like a university-sponsored conference formerly fostered once a year. This would allow students with the foster experience to come together and support each other. She wanted to create a community of support for other students who had been through similar experiences.

University-sponsored support programs can help the second and third stages of transition into post-secondary education. In the second stage, students would begin to interact with their new community. In the final stage, the student establishes their place in the university community (Tinto, 1988). Acceptance into the university atmosphere provides social support. It can also enhance students' optimism about enrollment in post-secondary education and support their feelings and emotions.

### *Other Students*

Other students may be a smaller community within the institution, for example, students in a course or common interests. No matter the case, other students can help bind the student to the institution. Creating strong ties or smaller communities within the post-secondary institution, such as “students with whom one shares a common interest or, more broadly, to the institution” (Tinto, 2017A). In the context of this research, other students not only bonded to the university but also taught them the processes they needed to complete their schooling. Emily did not know the process of applying to her internship. The group chats her classmates created kept all of them in the know with due dates and expectations. Student relationships help bind the students to the university. When issues or problems arise, students often inquire about solving the problem within their peer group. When those peer groups are not as helpful as needed, then students turn to university supports.

Peer groups can foster and nurture several vital factors in resilience. These peer groups can foster optimism, a sense of humor, attitude, and optimism. Several of these key resilience factors are in play at all stages of matriculation in post-secondary education. When the student’s resilient factors are enhanced, they are more likely to seek solutions to their problems, allowing them to continue their post-secondary education.

### *Implications*

Foster care alumni are a unique subset of college students. They come to post-secondary education having faced significant socio-economic challenges and emotional trauma that have the potential to either raise themselves and their families out of poverty or compound stressors and negative well-being. Each year more than 25,000 FY age out of the foster care system, and 79% of that population have the expressed desire to attend post-secondary education (Annie E.

Casey Foundation, 2018; Courtney et al., 2011). However, this population's graduation rate ranges between 2-11% (Gypen et al., 2017). Understanding the FY population's specific needs and the stressors that come with aging out of care are essential in meeting students and supporting them through post-secondary education. Only with the systematic evaluation of student's experiences in post-secondary education can there be an understanding of the population's unique needs.

Not supporting former foster youth in college can contribute to criminal involvement. Fifty percent of FY who are not connected to post-secondary education will be incarcerated within two years post exit; 80% of death row inmates are formerly FY. Besides, 20% of FY are immediately homeless, and 33.2% are living in poverty immediately post-exit (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017; Cutuli et al., 2016; Davis, 2006; Jones, 2011; McDonald, 1996; Pecora et al., 2006A; Reilly, 2003; US Department of Justice, Wolanin, 2005; Yang et al., 2017; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Foster care alumni who suffer from depressive symptoms or disorders at high levels are more likely to have academic and interpersonal difficulties and need extra support in obtaining their post-secondary education (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005).

Two theories guided this study. They are resilience theory and student departure theory. Resilience theory addresses characteristics a person utilizes or demonstrates to overcome obstacles in the face of adversity. Student departure theory addresses the relationship between the student and institution and the student and peers to help determine the level of persistence a student is most likely to utilize in their decision-making process of staying enrolled in college or leaving before obtaining a degree.

When these two theories work together, a researcher can identify coping mechanisms a student might utilize to predict stop-outs or withdrawals more accurately. For former FY in

higher education, these resilient factors can become more critical not only to finishing post-secondary education but to the success they see in their overall lives.

### Future Research

Understanding why students separate from post-secondary education has been a topic of interest to higher-education scholars for generations (; Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Batsche et al., 2014; Bean, 1985; Davidson et al., 2009; Zusman, 2005). As a result, there is research on almost every population of college-going students. However, FY often do not receive the same amount of attention in the literature because their post-secondary education attendance is minimal at best. Between the years 1990-2005, nine studies examined the educational attainment of FY. Of these nine studies, five asked about aspirations of going to college (Wolanin, 2005). Similarly, only four asked if the student enrolled in college, and only one survey differentiated between the community and four-year colleges (Wolanin, 2005). The more current research examined campus support programs, turning points for student success, equity and access issues, disabled foster care youth in college, utilizing trauma-informed theories to predict success in college or compare FY to non-FY college students (Courtney et al., 2011; Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Haas & Graydon, 2014; Lovitt & Emmerson, 2009; Neal, 2017; Rios et al., 2014; Salazar, 2012). While this expansion of knowledge concerning foster care youth is needed, the research has not examined student persistence of foster care alumni utilizing higher education theories.

The current study results examined student departure of foster care alumni through the lens of resilience and its protective factors along with formalized higher education theory. To date, this research of FY in post-secondary education is the only one to examine how students traverse through the contemplation of leaving school before achieving a degree through lenses of

resilience theory and student departure theory.

The present study was nuanced in that it examined the factors of student departure from the student perspective while simultaneously examining the factors through institutional perceptions. This means student departure theory used here examined student departure from an institutional standpoint. Nevertheless, I used the student narrative to explain the process using factors of resilience. More research involving student departure from the student perspective in combination resilience theory would further advance how foster care alumni progress through post-secondary education. Tinto (2017) believed institutions are looking too much at what they can do to retain students. However, he stated that students “do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist” (p. 254).

The conclusions presented here are localized and not generalizable to FY alumni’s needs in all colleges across the United States. Perhaps a quantitative study could provide more generalizable results. Also, the scope of this research was limited to the experiences of women in post-secondary education. Therefore, the data gleaned in this research cannot be assumed relevant to male populations who potentially have their own set of circumstances/experiences. Broadening the research footprint can bring valuable insight to foster care alumni in post-secondary education.

Comparisons of college graduation rates from community colleges also pose an exciting aspect of the research that has yet to be examined. Community colleges are far less expensive to students and usually have a greater variety in course modality. Research into the persistence rates and their comparison to four-year colleges is another nuance that should be examined. I found no studies currently looking at foster care alumni experiences in post-secondary education from a community college student’s perspective. Many times, foster care alumni leave post-secondary

education because of finances (Davis, 2006; Salazar, 2013; Wolanin, 2005).

There appears to be little research that links explicitly diagnosed mental illness among FY with low college attendance rates and completion (Wolanin, 2005). Salazar's (2013) study on the Casey Family Program scholarship recipients determined their study participants struggled with mental health issues. However, they did not elaborate on what that meant in context with overall graduation rates. Also, only one study of foster care alumni in post-secondary examined students with physical differences. The post-secondary education community is a microcosm of the larger, more complex, general community. All communities have persons with various mental health and physical differences. Research on students who have been diagnosed with mental illnesses should be conducted. Foster care alumni are diagnosed with PTSD 25% of the time, two times higher in former FY than for military combat personnel (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2017; Wolanin, 2005). These youth additionally are diagnosed with major depression disorder (20%), social phobia (17%), generalized panic disorder (15%), and anxiety disorder (12%) out of the total population (Morton, 2015; Wolanin, 2005). With the pervasiveness of mental health disorders among the foster youth population, it could be interesting to examine resilience factors' persistence and graduation rates of foster care alumni.

Many questions still need answers using resilience theory in the foster care alumni population. This study identified resilient factors that predicted student success and persistence. However, are these the only protective factors that predict retention? Is there a specific number of resilient factors needed for better outcomes, or are there specific factors researchers should identify?

## Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of eight formerly fostered young women currently



attending post-secondary education in a public university in the Southwest. These students' experiences showed how Resiliency theory's protective factors could better predict students' decisions on attending post-secondary education and continue when challenges threaten initial commitments. This study's protective factors of resilience included optimism, attitude, emotional awareness, and social support.

The participants displayed a sense of purpose in their desire to obtain a post-secondary education. This sense of purpose fueled their optimism when problems arose during the application process and when challenges came educationally and personally. The participants followed the literature in suggesting that social support was crucial to their success in post-secondary education. These supports came from both the student's personal life and the faculty and staff at the university. This supports Tinto's student departure theory. A significant determinate of a student's willingness to continue with education when problems arose was the university's willingness to stand beside the student and support them while they worked out those issues. Students who had trouble with FAFSA, students needed tutoring, and had trouble with finances all relied heavily on the academic partner's support to help the student appropriately navigate the system, which is unfamiliar to them.

While no one resilience factor helps determine formerly FY's success in post-secondary education, it became clear from the research that two important qualities came from social support and optimism. Participants utilized these two factors to determine their motivations to attend post-secondary education and remain enrolled until graduation.

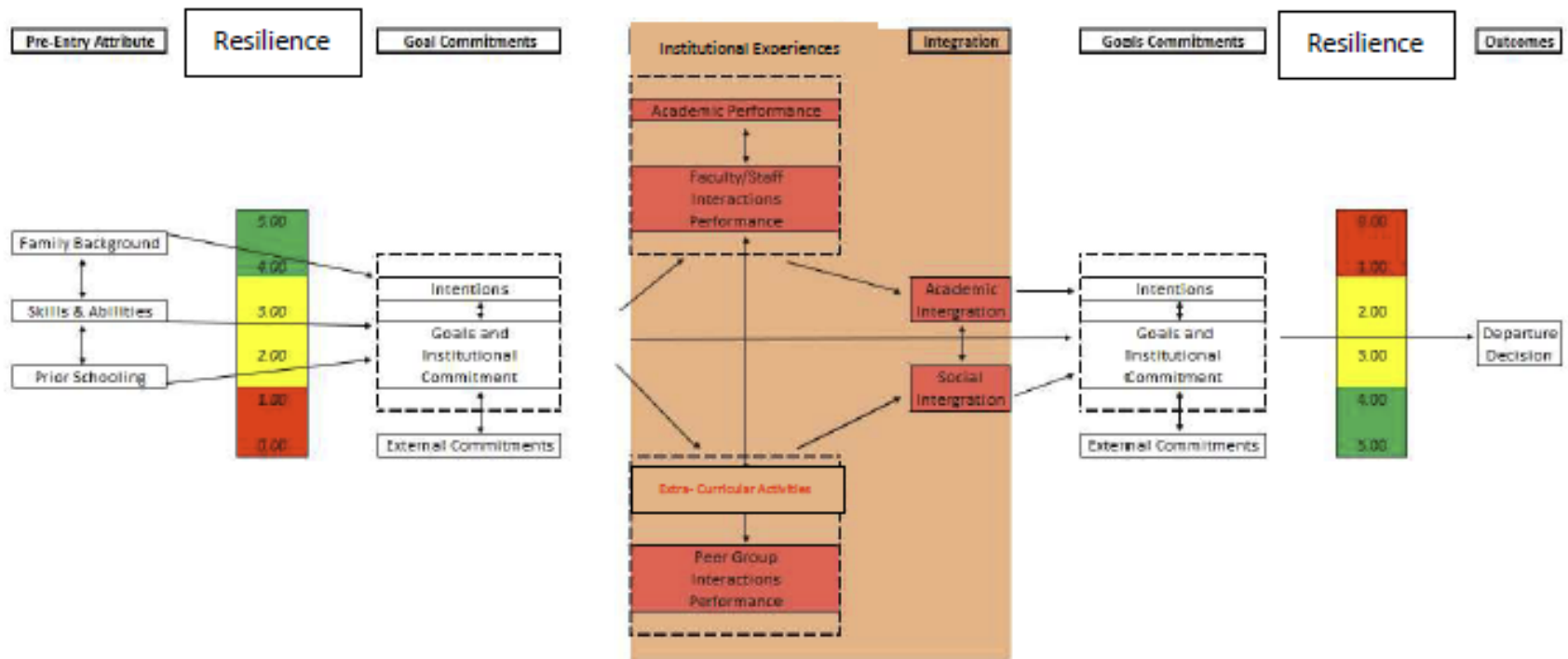
This paper began with a quotation from the League of Nations, Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1924). It stated, "Mankind owes to the child the best it has to give." By learning to

understand our most vulnerable populations' needs, motivations, and successes, we protect society. Tinto (2017) agreed:

Only when institutions understand how student perceptions shape decisions to persist and how their actions influence those perceptions, can institutions move to impact those decisions in ways that enhance the likelihood of more remarkable persistence while also addressing the continuing gap in college completion between students of various attributes and backgrounds. (p. 264)

APPENDIX A

COMBINED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Why did you make the decision to attend college?
2. In what ways did your family influence your decision to attend college?
3. In what ways did your friends influence your decision?
4. In what ways did your teachers influence your decision?
5. In what ways did other community members influence your decision?
6. How did your social/caseworker provide support in your decision to apply for and attend college?
7. What high school experiences prepared you for college?
8. What help did you receive in the college application process?
9. What things do you wish you had known about the application process?
10. What was your greatest concern about enrolling in college?
11. What is your most significant concern now that you are enrolled?
12. What pleases you about your college experience?
13. How does the university support you in continuing your education?
14. How might the university provide more support?
15. What campus resources have you utilized to support your stay in college?
16. What has been your greatest challenge in earning your degree?
17. What has been your greatest opportunity?
18. What would you like to add?

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